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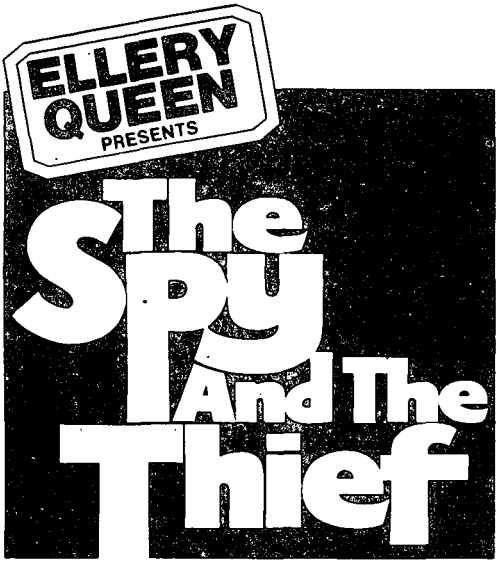

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The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S
Mystery Magazine

13 NEW stories

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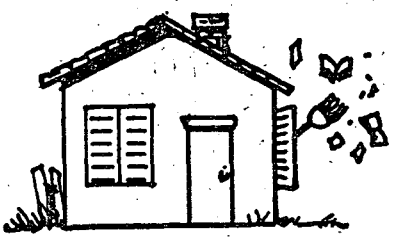

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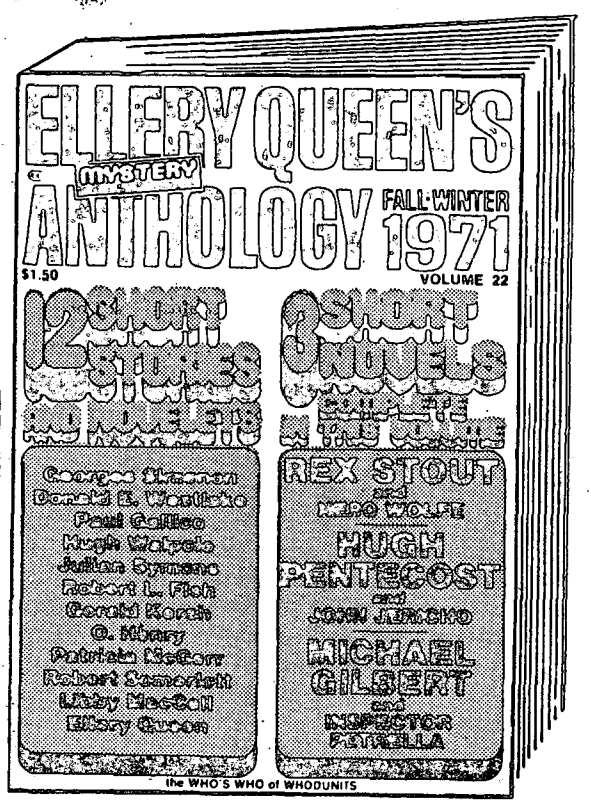

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a *NEW* Nevada story by

FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

Florence V. Mayberry knows the Nevada scene like the palm of her hand. Every word and phrase rings true. And this time the words are those of Dodie, the waitress at the Wren's Nest Dude Ranch in Washoe Valley, between Reno and Carson City; and the story is about "a real movie-type screwball," one Mitchell Peakness, who is always on the make, even while he's in Reno for the "cure" . . .

SCREEN TEST

by FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

Marty is his name. The fellow I went for down at the Wren's Nest Dude Ranch. A cute guy. Gee! Cute. Curly hair, maybe six feet tall, shoulders held cocky and swaggery. Slim hips. His figure great in Western blue jeans down low on his hips, cowboy boots run over from tromping around corrals and his legs swaying out as he walked. A real man kind of guy. A guy used to ranches—well, dude ranches, that is.

The only bad thing about Marty as far as I could tell when I met him was he was a dude cowboy. I mean, he was a sure enough cowboy but he worked at the Wren's Nest herding mostly dudes who were out to Nevada for a divorce. He herded them around the ranch teaching them to stick on a horse. Nights he herded them around the bars and gambling clubs in Reno.

I mean, he herded the ladies—the wrens. Oh, sure, sometimes men who came to Nevada for the "cure" were guests at the Wren's Nest. When they wanted to hide out from publicity. But most of our guests were women. And women need an escort. Marty was hired for that. Joe, too, but Joe really had his mind on horses. He just went along because that was part of the reason he got his paycheck.

Oh, man, when Marty smiled! Like he was just going

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to sleep or just waking up. A couple of times when the Ranch was low on wrens and the few there wanted to spend a night reading a good book or something, Marty took me in to Reno. Well, I tell you, he could dance too. Kind of stood in one spot and snuggled up.

I waited table at the Wren's Nest. Washed dishes too, swept up the dining room and kitchen. It isn't a big place. The only help besides Marty, Joe, and me was Evelyn the cook and Alice who did up the rooms. And the boss, of course, Margo Hanrahan. She gave the orders and tried to keep the guests thinking they were having fun when mostly they were miserable. Margo came from New York a long time ago for a divorce, married a cowboy, bought a dude ranch for him, divorced him, and kept the dude ranch. I think she had her eye on Marty for herself. She gave him fits those two times he left the ranch in the middle of the week and took me on dates.

How did I get to be a waitress at a dude ranch? Me, who for a whole year was Miss Laguna Beach of California, and that only five years ago? Oh, well, one of those things—it'll all come out when I get this told. But just for openers, a dude ranch is quiet. Out in the country you're not always bumping into people from here and there, maybe some you'd just as soon not see again. Besides, waiting table is my line of work. Good pay and good food. And as for Nevada, lots of waitresses want divorces too.

Things were going along okay until this movie big shot came out to the Wren's Nest. Like most of the other men guests who landed there, he said he wanted to bypass the big news. Reporters in Reno were too eager-beaver. And the Wren's Nest was tucked away in Washoe Valley, between Reno and Carson City up a side road.

Believe me, any girl who was Miss Laguna Beach has had a lot of guys make passes. But I never had a guy any time pay—well, you could say, such *intense* attention to me before. I almost spilled the soup when I passed it around that first night, the way he looked at me. Somehow gave me the creeps. Like I was a cow or horse or something at a State Fair. He walked close to me as he left the dining room and whispered in my ear, "Beautiful! Gorgeous! Lady, you're all there."

Margo Hanrahan caught it. She spoke to me later in the kitchen. "No blame on you, Dodie. But keep it cool with the customers. No involvement with this fellow, no matter how

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much he makes a play. I can't have that kind of trouble with the guests. And if you'd like to play it safe—first chance you get, go to some beauty shop and get those eyelashes trimmed so they won't flutter so much."

Well, I never fluttered them, not really. That's just the way they go when I look down or up, and I gotta look down if I serve soup or else scald somebody. I started to say something smart. But what the heck, I wanted to stay on. I'd picked that kind of place on purpose. So. "Yes, ma'am," I said.

When I cleared the table, there was a five-dollar bill under the movie man's plate. Wow! The biggest tip on the first day of a visit I ever got. The guests usually held out until they were going bye-bye on the day they got their divorces. You better believe I tucked it in my pocket before Evelyn could see it and want me to split it. Well, so what, I like money and I use it careful, too, hang onto it. Anyway, even if I was going to be generous, Evelyn might have spilled it to Mrs. Hanrahan. Then I'd have to wear Mother Hubbards or something when I served table.

I didn't even know the movie man's name that first night he was there. I learned it next day when Mrs. Hanrahan was briefing the hired help about him. Mitchell Peakness. Screwy name. Mrs. Hanrahan said he came from Australia, was making special movies for television in Hollywood, plus getting ready to make a big documentary back in Australia. He was unloading his wife before he left.

Mrs. Hanrahan didn't really need to warn Evelyn about Peakness. Evelyn was about 50 and all stove-up in her feet with big blue-veined ankles. Or Alice, the chambermaid. Alice was older than Evelyn, gray-haired and sweet, a real mother type. But anyway Margo did warn the three of us, with her eye on me, about what Mr. Peakness might do if he got bored. "I'll tell Joe and Marty to keep him out on the horses long enough every day so he'll want to go beddy-bye right after supper."

She had the right idea, but it didn't work. Man! That Peakness was a freak-out. I've heard somewhere that if you want to find a wild man, go look up the Aussies. Joe tried to stick close to him because Marty was busy with the women—or they were busy with him. But Joe was always losing him. That Aussie rode around the country making like a big spectacle movie, scaring the horse, yelling, "Charge! Lights, cam-

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era, it's a take!" Wheeling his horse away from where Joe was trying to lead him, cutting across neighboring dude ranches. I mean, unhinged. Mrs. Hanrahan got calls saying, get that drunk off our property, he's scaring our dudes.

Honest, Peakness was too much. Because he wasn't drunk. He didn't drink a thing but tea, or soft drinks. He was just looped by nature.

One afternoon I was standing in the yard beside the driveway and taking a breather. Joe was trying to herd Peakness out toward the Wren's Nest pastures. But Peakness slapped his horse, turned it toward the yard, galloped up to me, leaned down and swooped me under his arm. I was scared silly and yelling, my feet just off the ground, the horse wild and running. Peakness reined up and let me slide down. But before he let loose he said, "Margo's spooked you. Quit your job, I'll get you a better one. Let's you and I go out on the town—maybe up to Tahoe. I'll borrow the station wagon."

"What better job?" I asked. "In the movies?" Why not? I'm pretty enough and from what I read in the magazines, the money is out of sight. And I like money.

His blue eyes—y'know, they were kind of turquoise—danced over me. He laughed and said, "Let's make some home movies. Sort of a private showing?"

Sure. Just like all the guys. Marty too. I didn't have blinders over my eyes, the way Marty played up to the wrens.

But the idea of maybe getting into the movies, I liked that. I figured to play up to Peakness as much as I could get by with, what with Hanrahan acting like a sheepdog fanging at the wolves. And something else. It might make Marty jealous, take his mind off those rich wrens. Because Marty liked money, the same as I did. He probably figured one of the wrens would marry him and buy him a ranch like Margo Hanrahan bought her ex-husband. But he forgot that Margo still had the ranch and where was Mr. Hanrahan? Herding cows up in Elko.

I was upstairs delivering towels to Alice so she could distribute them around the rooms. Alice had a bad knee and it hurt her to walk up and down the stairs and so what—I'm only 23. I can run up and down the stairs all day and then dance all night, if I get the chance. The door to Peakness' room was open and I heard him whistling. He could whistle like a bird gone crazy, beautiful and wild.

I said, "Alice, I brought you

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up the towels a day ahead because tomorrow's my day off. I'm going in to Reno tonight instead of staying on the ranch, for a change." Loud.

Peakness popped his head out his door. He grinned and said, "The message came through, baby doll, you just got yourself a date. How did you know I was going in to Reno tonight?"

I said, loud enough so Margo could hear if she was listening, "Mr. Peakness, this just breaks me up, but I've already got plans. I'm going dancing at the Riverside Hotel."

"The very place I had in mind," he said. "Tell you what, introduce me to your boy friend and tell him you've promised all your dances to me." His voice dropped, just loud enough for me to hear. "Don't kid an old kidder, love—you talked loud so I could hear. And so if you want yourself a lovely thrilling evening, I'm your man."

I fluttered my eyes and said, "Mrs. Hanrahan doesn't like the hired help mingling with the guests, sir."

But I thought about it all the rest of the day. I figured the evening would be interesting. And believe me, I was ready for an interesting evening. Cooped up on this silly old dude ranch for five weeks with only two nights out—and neither of those on my day off.

When Marty and Joe were eating lunch in the kitchen I said to Evelyn, "When Marty drives the gang into Reno tonight I'm going along. How about it, Marty?"

"Oh, sure, honey," Marty said. "You gotta right, it comes with the job. What you planning for fun?"

"Well," I said, "I was thinking of going dancing at the Riverside. But that Peakness heard about it and says he's going to barge in and take all my dances. So I don't know what to do. You know how Margo is—about the female help mixing with the boy guests. Of course, when it comes to girl guests, she provides cowboys."

Marty turned red. Joe just looked like he hadn't heard a thing. "What you're getting at, I'm a damn gigolo," Marty said. "Listen, I work damn hard to earn my keep, saddling horses, rubbing down horses, feeding horses, riding herd on squealing women, seeing they don't break their—fall off. So I go dancing with them, too, see they have a little fun like the boss wants. If that's a gigolo, then I'm one."

"Good heavens, did I say a thing like that? It was only—well, it does seem odd that a good-looking fella like you only runs around with women who

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are rich and getting divorces. Usually a little old too. But each to his own, I always say. Evelyn, I'm going in to clear the places now. Are the pie servings ready?"

I smiled like an angel at Marty and pushed through the swinging door. I smiled like an angel all around the big table. Even at screwball Peakness. And that devil, when I served his pie, he pinched me. I would have conked him on the head with the pie plate, only I wanted to keep the job a while yet. And also, maybe later, Peakness could start me out in the movies.

Peakness was a good-looking cuss. I never realized it much until he got in the station wagon that night to go into Reno. On the ranch he was like a lot of big shots away from home—all slop, ragged jeans, faded shirt, hair in the eyes. But tonight! Pale green sport coat, dark green pants, coral sport shirt. It set off his tanned skin, those turquoise eyes, his dark hair and mustache. And all of it topped off with that hell-for-leather smile of his. Well, I kind of wished I was twins—one for Marty and one for Peakness.

Still, Marty was more my style. A guy who could be figured out. More or less went down a straight track. But Peakness was a zigzagger.

The station wagon was full before I got in. But it was in my work agreement that I would be taken into Reno or Carson City on my day off, whichever place I wanted. So they began to scoot over to make room. Peakness said, "Honey lamb, my lap is all yours." But a blonde wren, pretty but pushing forty, hopped on Preakness' lap and he zigzagged into the new game like a baby with a pacifier.

In Reno Marty parked the station wagon near the Courthouse on Virginia Street. The wrens got out, six of them. Two each for three men. "Lucky chaps!" Peakness said to Marty and Joe. "Three beautiful ladies each. So sorry, I have an appointment." He swept a gallant bow and swaggered down Virginia Street. Past the Riverside. Well, goodie.

I told the group good night, have fun, and walked on slowly and then deliberately turned into the Riverside Hotel so Marty could see where I was going. But as I was standing at the newsstand, fumbling around with the magazines, the gang went on by. Naturally those wrens were going to pick a different place from where the maid hung out. Especially if she used to be Miss Laguna Beach.

I was still fumbling around with the magazines, wondering

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if I ought to buy a couple of chocolate bars and go back to the station wagon, when Peakness slipped up behind me. "Ouch!" I yelled, and whirled on him. He'd pinched me again. I lowered my voice. "Will you kindly leave me alone? If that dude ranch crowd sees me with you, they'll report me to Mrs. Hanrahan. Listen, I work hard, I mind my own business—"

"Shut up, you're under arrest!" he said out of the corner of his mouth. Just loud enough for the salesgirl over by the cash register to hear. Her eyes popped out a foot. So did mine. "Come along, girl!" He took my arm and pulled me over to the salesgirl. "My good woman," he said to her, "perhaps you would be good enough to strip and search this girl. There is a strong possibility that she has secreted the Kohinoor diamond in her navel. And we gentlemen of the police are forbidden to touch a female prisoner."

Her mouth dropped. She swallowed. "Oh, gee," she said. "Right in here? I don't think the boss would like that. Why don't you do it in jail?"

"An excellent suggestion," Peakness said. "Madam, you have resolved this embarrassing problem. Come, Miss Hashimoto. By the way, this is the first time I have ever come across a Japanese international thief with auburn hair and violet eyes, but no doubt you have picked them up somewhere in your nefarious practices. Off to the lockup, girl."

Well, for a minute—the crazy shock of it—my heart was pounding. The guy was real movie-type screwball. Then I had to laugh. Gee, who wouldn't laugh? Except that salesgirl. She looked like she could kill both of us.

Peakness swung me out into the lobby, past the gambling tables, flashed a bill, and got a table beside the dance floor. He was so revved up by the little game he's playing that I thought he might hop like a kangaroo when he danced. But instead—well, he could have been a professional dancer before he got to be a big shot.

"Tell me about Australia," I said, with his cheek nuzzling mine while we danced. From Australia I figured to work around to how to get in the movies. Maybe tag along over to Australia with him when he went there to make his documentary.

"Australia, me eye," Peakness said. "You, love, is what we'll talk about. As for Australia, I haven't lived there since I was ten. Only trips, y'know. Hopped in and out of there. I'm kangaroo on my

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father's side, it was my mother who was the Koala bear. Listen, dearie, we'll need tests of you. For the movies, y'know. So since you don't need to go back to the ranch tonight or tomorrow, how about heading up towards Lake Tahoe tonight? I can rent a car and—"

Sirens went off in my head from every direction—ambulance, fire, police. No tay-ta-tay, as they say, with Peakness up at the Lake. "I'm expecting my date any minute," I said. "If my date wants to go with you up to Tahoe, why, all right. In the meantime, while I'm waiting for him, why don't you go get your cameras?"

"Oh, fine, birdie," Peakness agreed. "Let's go wait for your date in the lobby. Yes, love, that's what we'll do. And if the boy stands you up, why, there's always good old standby Peakness waiting to show you the high spots of Tahoe." He pitched back his head, laughing, whirled me off the dance floor, and skimmed me across the lobby onto a divan.

"Forget Tahoe," I said, icy-like. I tried to figure out the best way to tell him to go you-know-where. The guy was fun, but he made me uneasy.

Oh, wow, happy evening! The gang came in. Marty, Joe, and the wrens. The women were a little high, all gay and squealy. The minute the blonde saw Peakness she ran over and kissed his cheek. "Ah, lovely one, how did you know I had been searching the entire city for you?" Peakness asked. "I was just asking this strange woman if she had chanced to see a beautiful blonde around here, and in you come."

He turned, bowed to me, and dropped a dime in my lap. "My good woman, go buy the evening paper. Perchance you may locate a good lecture or something of a similar uplifting nature."

With that he swept off with the blonde.

Nut! I didn't know whether to be glad or sorry.

Marty grinned, admiring the smart aleck instead of being mad at him. Then he and Joe took the wrens into the bar and the dance floor. So have fun, I said to Marty in my mind, have fun with these tired girls of 40 and 50 with their sad eyes.

I sat there feeling awful. All the fellows in the lobby seemed to have women with them. Anyway, I don't like pickups. I don't trust strangers.

The desk clerk began giving me the cold funny eye and a bellhop had a smirky look on his face as he went by my chair. I got up, went out the lobby door, wondering what to do

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until Marty got tired of herding his harem and took the station wagon back to the ranch. I had enough money so I could have stayed in the Riverside if I'd wanted to, but I wasn't about to spend my money just sleeping. Besides, I liked staying at the ranch. Nice and quiet, as I said.

I went across the street, stood on the bridge, and looked down at the Truckee River. Somebody put arms around me and pulled me back. The kangaroo, of course. Peakness.

"Don't do it," he said. "You're so young and life is so beautiful."

Well, who could keep from laughing?

"Where's your blonde friend?" I asked.

"Dancing with a stranger," he said. "It seems the chap she was with before whirled her about until she landed dizzily in a chair next to an unaccompanied male who had no business sitting alone at a table— Love, you *did* miss me and were ending it all because—"

"Oh, shut up. Are all you people in the movies screwballs?"

"Ah, you have discovered the secret of the movie game! One is given a mental test before being privileged to enter that field. Failure to pass the test qualifies one for admittance. Dodie, you'll never make it. An intelligent and practical girl like you is destined for the higher station of a hashslinger. Now will *you* shut up and let's go see the sights. And maybe Tahoe later?"

"No Tahoe," I said. "Reno's got everything."

Did we have fun! But finally I was afraid Marty might pick up his wrens and Joe and take off without us. I insisted on going back to the car. So Peakness went back around one side of the block and I came the other way. Like we hadn't seen each other all evening in case some one blabbed to Mrs. Hanrahan.

Marty was behind the wheel and scowling. The wrens jabbered at Peakness and me like tape recorders, about how they were utterly exhausted, why had we kept them waiting so long, oh, how they longed for a nice warm bath and a good book. Joe, of course, was always Joe. Just looking off into the distance like he saw a herd of horses moving about a mile away.

Peakness laughed and cuddled the blonde onto his lap. His other arm went around another wren, a squatty dark type who ran her A's through her nose.

Back at the ranch Marty took my arm and held me back

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le the others went in the ıse. "Filly, you run a fast :k, don't you?" he said. sten, sometime when Hanra- hasn't got babysitting lined for me, why don't you and I running together?"

"Who's a filly?" I asked. :n wished I'd kept my uth shut. I never told one at the ranch I'd been rried. "Listen, cowpoke, k to your Fifth Avenue etrack. It may get you in the ney."

He gave me a shove, whirled, l stalked off toward the n's bunkhouse.

I walked over to the cottage ere the female hired hands yed. At the front door I ıld hear Alice and Evelyn ring into each other, one up the high notes while the ıer hit the low. Each of us l our own room, but the rtitions didn't mean much.

Gee! It was a lousy prospect. day off just to lay around all y in that rickety-rackety little ɔm of mine. I'd been doing ıt now for several weeks, and vas sick of it.

I had my dress half over my ad when there was a tap at y window. I switched off my ht, lifted the blind a crack, d peeked out. The kangaroo, course.

"Oh, come off it, I know u're there," Peakness whispered. "Listen, Dodie, let's go have some more fun. I'm not sleepy and you're not either. In another fifteen minutes these cowboys will be off to never-never land. Let's take the station wagon—the keys are in it. Let's go see what Carson City has to offer."

Well, why not? Carson City is fairly lively.

"Okay," I said.

"Meet me in twenty minutes. Up by the outer road. I'll push the car up there so Margo won't hear it start."

For a rich guy he was sure ready to use muscle. I wondered why he hadn't rented a car so he could run it around any old time he wanted. Except you'd be surprised how tight in some things rich people can be.

I waited the 20 minutes, then tiptoed out of the cottage and ran on the grass beside the driveway so I wouldn't kick up gravel. Peakness had the wagon with its nose out on the road. It was a county road with the main highway up about a mile. "Give us a hand," Peakness said. "Let's shove it down the road a bit before we start up. Some of the house lights are still on. We don't want the girls trying to go with us."

I giggled and helped give the car the old heave-ho. "An Amazon too," Peakness said admiringly. "For a slim little

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trick you've really got muscle."

Well, sure. I was a gymnast star in high school. That helped me get to be Miss Laguna Beach.

Down the road we got in the car and Peakness started it up.

The tires screeched into the main highway. By the time we hit the hills above Carson, Peakness was doing 85. "Slow down!" I said. "You keep this up, we'll never even see Carson City as we fly over it."

"Oh, love, you're bright, you are!" He grinned at me. "How you do get onto me. Because we're going to widen Carson out a bit as we pass through—on up to Tahoe where good old one-track mind Peakness wanted to go all along. Listen, Dodie, that's where the big fun is. What have you got against Tahoe?"

"Well, okay," I said. "Only let's get there, let's not get splashed all over Nevada first." So he slowed down, maybe five miles an hour less.

"But listen," I said. "Stick to the Nevada side. After all, you're here for a divorce and you're setting up residence. Well, uh—well, maybe I'm getting a divorce, too, who knows? And I'd just feel more comfortable staying put in Nevada."

"So, chickadee, you've got family secrets too? Put your head over on Peakness' shoulder and cry your little heart out, there's the girl." He yanked my head over. But it felt good, so I left it there. "Y'know, Dodie, you *are* a beauty. And, listen, you stick with old Peakness, you'll learn how to fail intelligence tests."

He slowed down through Carson City, then picked up speed again as we turned up the mountain towards Lake Tahoe. At the top of the mountain we could see the lights sprinkled all around the Lake shores, peppered by brighter clusters which were the gambling clubs and hotels. We came down the mountain, then turned right and kept going. Too far. I'd been around Lake Tahoe lots of times when I lived in Sacramento, and I knew we were heading toward the California side of the Lake.

"Hey, why don't you go the other way?" I asked. "I told you I don't want to go to California."

"Who's to know, Dodie? Anyway, a day or so out of Nevada won't affect residence—Margo will testify we live at the ranch. Shut up, love, let's zoom around the Lake and find which spot is best to play in."

Well, he made me nervous. Who needs to zoom over to the California side of the Lake when the fun spots are in

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Nevada? I mean, the guy had something in mind. I could feel it. With a screwball like he was it could be anything. Still, I thought, a movie big shot—well, would he want to get involved in a scandal, maybe get sued—now, would he? A scandal would mess up his divorce.

I settled back in my seat, my head off his shoulder. The palms of my hands were wet.

We reached the spot where the road turns back around the Lake, going around the California side, back to where it joins up again with Nevada. Peakness didn't turn that way. He turned towards Truckee. California.

"Damn it, let me out!" I said. "Don't try to tell me there are big night clubs in Truckee. It's a hamburger and coffee stop between Sacramento and Reno. What are you up to anyway?"

"Okay, love, have it your way." He slowed the car. "We'll just stop out here in the nice dark woods."

"No!" I said. Ye gods, I thought, what have I let myself in for? "You keep going or man, oh, man, will you ever get trouble! What do you want to do, ruin your divorce?"

"Oh, that's right, that's right," he said. "Forgot the bloody divorce for the moment. As you say, Dodie. We'll be on our way. Into Truckee. Like you say, it's on the way to Reno. Reno's safer anyway for people like us, wouldn't you say, Dodie love?"

Now he was talking "safer." What did *he* mean, safer? Wasn't it his idea, all fired up over Tahoe, now Truckee? I tell you, he made me so nervous. It was like little worms were crawling all over me.

He was hitting 90 now. But at three in the morning the highway patrol must have all been in bed. The lights of the few cars we met skidded past so fast it made me dizzy.

My mouth was dry. I didn't want to be back in California. But more than that, I didn't want to be in this car with this high-powered, smart-aleck screwball.

The lights of Truckee came up. Peakness slowed so we were only doing 50 when we hit the main street. And then zero as we stopped in front of a building. "Let's have a ball right here in Truckee," Peakness said. "Who else but us going to Truckee for fun?"

He reached over, took my hand, patted my wrist. And there I was with a handcuff on my wrist, and Peakness with the other end of it around his.

"It's just so we don't get separated before we see the Chief of Police," he said, grinning. "Oh, Dodie, doll,

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don't look so surprised. It's only a citizen's arrest. Well, kind of—sometimes the people I meet don't think private detectives are citizens. Or even human. Dodie, darling, we're in California. Not Nevada. We are now in California, and there's a warrant out for you in California."

"Are you completely crazy? Listen, I don't go for these screwball movie gags. I'm fed up with them *and* with you. What are you doing, working up some television series?"

"Good try, Dodie. Spirit, that's what. Oh, by the way, shall I introduce you to the police as Dodie Greer or Becky Hammond? Which do you prefer? If it's Dodie Greer, we can work back to Becky Hammond. Or if it's Becky, we can work up to Dodie. Come to think of it, that's better. Let's start with Becky who banged the cashier at the restaurant where she worked over the head and hastily took off with $1250. And then went home and slugged her old man."

There's no use to yank on a handcuff with a 170-pound muscular man on the other end. Better be nice. Talk. Cry. Maybe he'd take it off. Oh, yes, be nice. After that, once the handcuff was off, we'd see. These big blocky heels on women's shoes these days hit hard. That's what I used on Steve, my husband. I was sick of him, and when he found out about the $1250 and threatened me I clobbered him. Dumb guy. Had that same sleepy-eyed look Marty has, only it was because he was stupid.

I brought out the sobs. "It was because of my husband. If you knew what I had to go through, it was terrible, I had to get away, I never should have married him—"

"Sure," Peakness said. He yawned. Damn him! "That's what he thinks now. That is, when he can get his brains all in the right slots. He's not clear in his head yet. But I'll tell you something, Dodie-Becky, that restaurant chain you worked for sure is clear-headed. They hired old Peakness. They said if this thieving little waitress gets away with this it'll set a bad precedent. Give other pretty little dolls naughty ideas. Peakness, old boy, get the gal, they said, and money's *no* object. So Peakness said to himself, suppose I was a smart good-looking kid like this Becky, where would I go? Why, out of the state, of course. Where? Why, over the hill into Nevada, into that nice little wicked city of Reno. So Peakness began asking around Reno where I could find a

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good-looking chick with red hair and violet eyes and a figure."

He chucked me under the chin. My free hand came up and out. Whang! I slapped him. 'Wish I could lay a hand on you where you need it worst," he said. "But maybe this will hurt just as bad. Know who told me where I could find you? Good old Marty. For twenty bucks. Met him in a bar with his ladies, while I was showing your picture around to the bartenders."

"You mean—"

"I mean, he kept his mouth shut. So now I owe him another fifty. For riding along with the gag that I was a big movie man until I could get you back into California, and for letting me borrow the car. Think of my problems, lovey—extradition papers are tough to get and they take time. Besides, you only stole a picayune $1250 and your old man may pull through. And before we could get extradition papers there'd be the nasty old problem of proving Dódie Greer was Becky Hammond."

I stomped at his foot. He pulled it away and chucked me under the chin again. "Sweet kid," he said. "I like a woman with spirit. Still and all, I don't mind checking you in with the police instead of lugging you over the hill into Sacramento. Who wants to end up at the foot of Donner Pass? Here we go jaily-bye, lovey!"

I hate a guy like that. He always made me uneasy, a guy you couldn't be sure of. But then, I don't seem to run into the kind of men you can trust. Like Marty. Making money off me! And Steve. Steve said I'd have to share that money I took or he'd turn me in . . .

Well, kid, that's my story. What did you get in for?

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a *NEW* Gideon story by

J. J. MARRIC (John Creasey)

first publication in the United States

Beginning a new series about George Gideon, Commander of the C.I.D. (the Criminal Investigation Department of New Scotland Yard)... Gideon is a born detective. He has a built-in radar system for ratiocination, invisible antennas that pick up even the tiniest of crime waves...

GIDEON AND THE CHESTNUT VENDOR

by J. J. MARRIC (John Creasey)

Old Ben Fairley had sold fresh roasted chestnuts for more winters than he could remember. As a matter of fact, he remembered very little of his 70-odd years, for he had always lived almost entirely in the present, whether it was good or bad. Each summer he went out on the road, calling on those farms where he could find temporary employment planting or hoeing or fruit picking. Each winter he came "home," to the rooming house near London's Covent Garden, where he stored his barrow and brazier, bought his chestnuts at wholesale, and roasted them.

Old Ben's pitch was near Leicester Square.

His chestnuts were always fleshy and white, brought all the way from sun-drenched Italy, and old Ben was as fussy as a chef while splitting them and turning them and keeping them hot.

The fire in the brazier also kept him warm.

Many people knew him, passing his barrow with a smile or a nod, sometimes pausing to hand him a shilling or a two-shilling piece, usually "forgetting" to take their bag of chestnuts. Some, on the other hand, liked chestnuts, and were not embarrassed to skin and eat them as they pounded London's hard pavements.

Among these was George

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Gideon, Commander of the Criminal Investigation Department of New Scotland Yard. From time to time, often late at night after the theater crowds had left and London was quiet and empty, Gideon would stroll round the square mile which included all Soho as well as Piccadilly Circus and Leicester Square, almost as if he owned the ground he walked on. Certainly he loved it. The sight of his solid massive figure, his square chin thrust forward, his broad forehead wrinkled under iron-gray hair, was familiar to newsdealer and pavement artist, taxi driver and night-club tout, peddler and policeman.

On cold nights Gideon would stop at old Ben's chestnut barrow, pay his shillings, take a soft appetizing nut, and pop it hot and whole into his mouth.

"Must have a palate like a piece of iron," old Ben would say. Or: "You're the only man I know who can open those nuts without burning his fingers. How do you do it, Mr. Gideon?"

"I get a tough skin catching bad men," Gideon would answer invariably.

They would both laugh, and Gideon would stay for a few moments, talking to old Ben, tossing the husks onto the fire and watching them blaze.

One night, only half an hour after he had left the chestnut vendor, a taxi drew up close to old Ben's barrow. Ben watched first one, then two, three, four youths scramble out, and sensed some kind of trouble. Almost at once another taxi screeched to a halt at the far side of the street. This time old Ben was too busy to count how many men got out; he had grabbed the handles of his barrow and started to move off.

He did not get far.

Suddenly one of the youths pushed him aside. As old Ben staggered, another snatched at the barrow and a third began to pluck the chestnuts from their wire container. Angry now, as much as frightened, old Ben shouted a protest.

More youths rushed up, and passers-by stopped in alarm as the two groups fought. In the struggle someone pushed against the brazier and tipped it over. As old Ben ran forward to save his chestnuts, red-hot coals glowed like tracers through the air, striking against his outstretched hands.

He screamed with pain.

A police whistle shrilled out.

In five minutes old Ben Fairley, groaning and only half conscious, was being rushed to the hospital. The two opposing gangs had disappeared, and the hot coals, scattered across the

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pavement, were dying.

Gideon heard of this in the middle of his briefing session at New Scotland Yard at about half-past ten the next morning. It was mentioned almost in passing by a Superintendent Lloyd who was in charge of the police attempt to curtail the activities of the teen-age gangs in Soho.

"I could understand if they had a purpose," Lloyd was saying. He was big, earnest, and Welsh. "But they fight just for the sake of fighting. Razor blades and brass knuckles were used again last night, George."

Gideon looked bleak. "Did you catch any of them?"

"No. They were gone before our chaps arrived. The swine don't care what damage they do or whether they injure anybody. This time an old chestnut seller was badly burned when they knocked over his brazier."

Gideon stiffened. "Chestnut seller? Where was his pitch?"

"Just past the National Portrait Gallery, near Leicester Square," the Superintendent answered.

Gideon pressed a bell on his desk and when his assistant came in he said quickly, "A chestnut seller was burned last night near Leicester Square. Find out what his name was, where he is, and how he's doing."

"Right," said the assistant, a tall, lean, bony man named Lemaitre.

"Do you know the fellow?" asked the Welshman.

"If it's the man I think it is, I've known him for thirty years," said Gideon. "Have you put in your report yet?"

"It's being typed out now."

"See that I get a copy," Gideon ordered.

Very soon he learned that it was indeed Ben Fairley, that old Ben was comfortable, but that for a man of his age the shock might have grave consequences.

"His hands are burned so badly that he won't roast any more chestnuts for some time," Lemaitre reported. "He can see visitors, though."

"Have we got a man with him?"

"Lloyd didn't ask for one," Lemaitre said defensively. "It isn't as if he were involved in any particular crime. Just these young hooligans fighting among themselves."

Gideon grunted.

He studied the brief report, prepared as routine, as well as two statements from eyewitnesses, which also said very little. Armed with these, Gideon went to have a word with old Ben at the Charing Cross Hospital. He had never seen the man washed and shaved before.

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Both of Ben's hands were heavily bandaged, and he looked tired and worn; but his eyes were bright in his lined face, and his frail voice held a note of anger.

"Just rushed at me, they did, and *I'd* never done them any harm. Never even seen them before in my life!"

"We'll get them, Ben," said Gideon; and he meant to. "Tell me a little more, will you?"

"There's nothing more to tell," said old Ben. "One lot came up in one taxi and the other lot came up in another. Just rushed at me, they did."

"How did you burn your hands?" asked Gideon.

Ben looked at him as if wondering how an intelligent man could ask such a question.

"Trying to save my chestnuts, of course. They were my capital, Mr. Gideon—I needed them if I was going to stay in business."

"I'll see that you stay in business," promised Gideon. "Now, Ben, what happened after that? The report says there were no chestnuts left in the basket."

"The so-and-sos grabbed them," said Ben, anger making his voice hoarse. "Fancy stealing a few bobs' worth of chestnuts from an old man! How mean can you get?"

"Don't you worry about it," said Gideon soothingly. "Just tell me this. How many chestnuts did you have?"

"About five pounds—in weight, I mean. That would be including those the young lady gave me. But Mr. Gideon—"

"Young lady?" interrupted Gideon sharply. "What young lady? And when did she give you the chestnuts?"

"Yesterday afternoon, Mr. Gideon. She came out of one of those new apartment houses at the back of Oxford Street. I've seen her several times as I've pushed my barrow past there—it's on my route to the pitch, see. 'Hello, dad,' she says, 'I've got something for you.' Then she hands me a great big bag of chestnuts. Beauties, they were—otherwise I wouldn't have sold them," added Ben virtuously.

Gideon leaned forward. "Now, Ben, think hard. Are you quite sure about all this?"

" 'Course I'm sure!" cried Ben. "A bit of all right, she is, with long blonde hair hanging down her back. Funny thing, life, ain't it, Mr. Gideon? In the afternoon someone gives me chestnuts—in the evening someone pinches 'em, and my own with 'em."

Gideon was looking thoughtful. "One of the new apartment houses behind Oxford Street," he murmured to himself. "Blonde. Hmm." Slowly he got

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to his feet. "Yes, it's a funny life, Ben. But you take it easy. When you're well, I'll see you get all you need to start up in business again."

Leaving the hospital Gideon hurried back to New Scotland Yard, and as soon as he reached his office he sent for Superintendent Lloyd.

"Any lead on those lads in the fight last night?" Gideon asked.

"No, Commander. Two of our chaps saw them, but they weren't the usual Soho troublemakers. That's the problem—it's contagious. What fun they got out of snatching a few chestnuts, heaven only knows."

"Check with N.E. Division on Dicey Gamble and find out if he still lives in one of the new apartment houses behind Oxford Street," said Gideon. "And find out what color his wife's hair is—she used to bleach it," he added thoughtfully.

Lloyd looked up sharply.

"Dicey? I saw him only last week, and he's still living in that flat—must cost him a fortune. His wife's a blonde."

"A bit of all right?" inquired Gideon. "With long hair?"

"You've got her to a T," said Lloyd. "Why she ever married that thieving slob I'll never know. What's on your mind about Dicey?"

Dicey Gamble was the leader of a small group of smash-and-grab raiders who specialized in robbing jewelry shops. He had already been to prison once, and some of his "boys" were still inside, but he could always find others to join him.

"Call it a long shot," replied Gideon. "Tell N.E. Division to find out if any of his gang bought any chestnuts recently. If necessary, check every grocer in the district. Get a move on, there's no time to lose."

The Superintendent hurried out and within an hour he was on the telephone to Gideon.

"You were right, sir! One of Dicey Gamble's boys bought two pounds of chestnuts yesterday morning."

"Good! Get all the help you need and raid Dicey's apartment straight away," Gideon ordered. "I'm just going home. Phone me there and let me know what happens."

He wished, as he so often did, that he could take an active part in what was to follow; in this, at least, he envied his subordinates, who had the stimulus and excitement of physical action.

At seven o'clock that evening the police from N.E. Division and from the Yard arrived at Dicey Gamble's apartment.

Panic showed in Dicey's eyes when the Yard men appeared at

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his door, but the panic was quickly veiled.

"I've got nothing here, Super," he insisted. "You can search the place, but you won't find anything."

Lloyd looked at him squarely. "You won't get away with that old chestnut, Dicey."

The color drained from Dicey's face. Lloyd pushed past him and walked through the apartment, stopping short when he came to the kitchen. The table was covered with a sheet of newspaper, and on the newspaper was a pile of chestnuts. Dicey had obviously been in the process of cutting each nut in two—several had already been halved.

In eight of the halves, buried inside the hard nuts, were diamonds.

"There's nothing new in this game," Gideon explained to Lloyd. "I once knew a thief who split a hazelnut in two, put a diamond inside, and stuck the shell together. The gangs that attacked old Ben obviously weren't in it for the sheer fun—so they were in it for the chestnuts. Add to that the fact that old Ben was given chestnuts by a woman who lived in the same house as one of our cleverest jewel thieves, and it all started to make sense."

"I'll say it made sense," agreed Lloyd. "Dicey and his mob had these hot diamonds and hid them in the chestnuts. One of the boys dumped them at Dicey's flat, on instructions. But Dicey was out, and as neither he nor his wife eat chestnuts, wifey gave them to old Ben."

"Everyone says she's a bit of all right," murmured Gideon.

Later that day, as he sat with old Ben at the Charing Cross Hospital, Gideon finished the story.

"As soon as Dicey discovered what his wife had done, he got his mob together for a raid on your barrow to get back the chestnuts—but in getting word to his boys, another gang learned what had happened and reached you first. Dicey's lot caught up with them. Simple, Ben, wasn't it?"

Old Ben gave a slow, pleased smile. Perhaps when he next roasted chestnuts he would dream of a fortune in diamonds.

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NEW—

the first parody-pastiche of J. J. Marric's GIDEON

by JON L. BREEN

A shrewdly sensitive spoof of J. J. Marric's (John Creasey's) George Gideon in particular, and of the English police-procedural in general . . . Congratulations to JLB and JJM-JC . . .

GILLIAM'S TACT

by JON L. BREEN

Gilliam, the Commander of London's C.I.D., approached his office in New Scotland Yard with a vague sense of anticipatory unpleasantness, an intuitive conviction that it would not be a good day. Odd, since he'd left home in the highest of spirits. The day had been so cheerful and sunny that he'd decided to walk to work, through Euston Square and Notting Hill Gate, along Kensington High Street and past the Tower of London, through Carnaby Street with its throngs of American tourists, up the Strand to Woburn Place, and along Praed Street to the statue of Eros in front of Madame Tussaud's. It was an invigorating walk, marred only by the solicitations of several young ladies who, for members of their profession, were up remarkably early in the morning.

All the London sights and smells had made Giles Gilliam's heart light, despite the knowledge that behind the closed doors of the houses and offices he passed, the seeds of crime were constantly being planted and sown and reaped and harvested and replanted. The police had the duty to pull out these weeds of crime. Was it the breakdown of his metaphor that was troubling him? One doesn't plant weeds, after all.

Of course, there was that little matter he had to take up with Lemartyr, his second in

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command. It would be difficult to broach the matter to Lem in just the right way—so that he wouldn't take offense. Lem was such a sensitive chap. Giles entered his office feeling a touch irritable and determined not to take it out on his subordinates.

"Good morning, Giles," Lemartyr greeted him, with a first-name familiarity that few at the Yard ventured. Most of them preferred a deferential "sir," and some would use the familiar nickname of GeeGee. Lemartyr seemed a bit depressed this morning.

"Good morning," Gilliam replied. Had he snapped out the greeting? He hoped not. He knew that the slightest edge of irritation would be noted by Lemartyr. It was so important to maintain friendly relations with one's underlings. No one knew that better than a man as high up as Giles.

"Busy night?" he asked casually, glancing at the morning's newspapers, as always spread out on his desk to await his perusal.

"Average," Lem replied. "Some threats to blow up the Houses of Parliament on Guy Fawkes Night."

"Routine."

"Grand Slam, the Derby winner, was kidnaped from his stall."

"Hm. Bad show that."

"The P.M.'s had some threats, and the Home Secretary's up in the air over it. Some chaps pinched the Crown Jewels last night. The afternoon papers will be full of it, I daresay."

Giles sighed. Journalists could be tiresome, and as an administrator the task of dealing with them often fell to him. It was a task too trivial to occupy the valuable time of the workaday policemen under his command, an irony Giles had stoically to bear.

"The Midi-Skirt Murderer got another." Lem seemed to brighten a bit. "I can't imagine where he finds them. The midis have disappeared from the streets of London since he started his string a month ago."

It was true, Gilliam knew. The elusive strangler struck only girls wearing the mid-calf dress lengths that the designers had been trying to impose. The latest victim was the eighth. Giles had recently observed ladies of 75 and 80 wearing skirts five to eight inches above their knees.

"I wonder if the end is in sight," he mused.

"Very nearly," Lemartyr replied with a vulgar laugh.

Giles made himself smile. Lem's earthy humor seldom appealed to him, but he

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couldn't afford to precipitate any unpleasantness. There was that little matter.

"Lem, there's something we must speak about."

The phone rang then, and Lemartyr reached to pick it up.

"Lemartyr here . . . Oh, yes, sir, he's here. It's for you, Giles. The Commissioner."

Giles reached for the phone with a pained expression. "Yes, sir? . . . Very well. I'll be right over." The talk with Lemartyr would have to wait.

Commissioner Sott-Gnarl was in his dressing gown when he rose to greet Giles Gilliam. As each was as tall as the other, they could look each other in the eye.

"I say, old thing, how's the jolly old C.I.D.?"

"Fine, sir," Giles answered. How did one answer a question like that?

"Good, good. I'm off to the hare-coursing field, Giles, and I hoped you'd join me. Jolly good sport, don't y'know."

"I'm sorry, sir, but there are pressing matters at the Yard. The Derby winner and the Crown Jewels are gone."

"My word! When it rains it pours, what? But I say, can't silly old what's-his-name—?"

"Lemartyr, sir."

"Can't Lemartyr take over? He's a capable man, isn't he?"

Giles was silent. Questions like that always embarrassed him.

"I see, I see. Covering up for him, eh? How did that incompetent get so high in the organization?"

Giles felt obliged to defend Lemartyr. But how could he do so without offending his chief? On the other hand, how could he remain silent and then face Lemartyr back at the office?

"Never mind," Sott-Gnarl said jauntily after a pause of five or ten minutes. "I wish you could join me, Giles. Hare-coursing is the only real sport there is since bear-baiting bit the dust. But the job comes first, eh?"

"You're a silly ass, sir," Giles said quietly.

"Quite, quite. Well, round up those nasties, Giles, and we'll confer again next year."

"Thank you for your time, sir."

On his way back to headquarters Giles popped into the Tower of London to inquire about progress in tracing the missing Crown Jewels. As he entered the Tower grounds, roped off from tourists since the discovery of the crime, he was thrown heavily to the ground by the constable on duty.

Giles looked up at his

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attacker, fighting back an unreasonable irritation.

The constable was flustered and apologetic, inadvertently employing Gilliam's Yard nickname in his sputtered regrets. "GeeGee! Am I a fool without a mind or have I merely been too blind to realize?"

"Quite all right," Giles assured the young policeman, getting up and dusting himself off. "Can't be too careful, you know. Who's in charge here?"

"Inspector Skittish, sir."

Giles grimaced, he hoped, imperceptibly. If he approached, Inspector Skittish, a competent policeman but the victim of a severe persecution complex, would resent the interference from higher up and cause some unpleasantness. Better to give the fellow his head, let him go his own way.

"Any leads on the bad guys?" Giles asked the constable with a tight smile.

"Not that I know of, sir."

"Carry on then. Don't mention to Inspector Skittish that I was here, will you? There's a good lad."

Back at the Yard, Giles summoned his aplomb and approached Lemartyr again.

"Lem, I rather hesitate to bring this up."

"Well now, Giles," said Lemartyr expansively, "you needn't hesitate. I know you're always afraid I'll take offense, but I know my place here. After all, you're the Commander of the C.I.D., aren't you? And I'm just your Number One flunky, aren't I? And dependably not too bright, eh? I know my limitations, Giles, better than anybody. So whatever it is, you go right ahead and say it straight out."

"Very well, Lem. Good of you to see it in that light. Lem, I wonder if you'd tell me why you murdered all those girls. I mean that was a bit of an anti-social act, wasn't it? Not the sort of thing I'd have expected of you."

"Well, Giles, I'd been wondering if you'd bring that up at last. I did it because those long skirts are immoral and indecent and all that unnatural covering up would inevitably bring London a whole new epidemic of perverted sex crimes. I didn't want to see this great city brought to her knees, Giles."

"That's an odd way of putting it, Lem."

"That's why I'll never get any higher in the force, Giles. I don't have your way with words. Anyway, I feel that by killing those girls I saved a lot of other girls from a fate worse than death, as it were. Don't you see?"

"Lem, I can hardly agree

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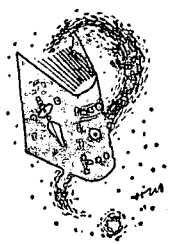
with the way you went about it," Giles replied uncomfortably.

"One thing, Giles—how'd you know it was me? I mean, I knew you'd figure it out one day, you being so much more acute than I am. But I'm damned if I know how you figured it out."

"Well, Lem, you always dispatched our chaps to the scene before the crime was reported. I thought it rather odd, and after a bit I put two and two together, you might say."

Lemartyr laughed. "Giles, do you mean to tell me that with all the resources of Scotland Yard behind you, you'd actually confront a murder suspect with a flimsy piece of guesswork like that? Giles, you sometimes act like a character in a thriller."

"But not often," Giles replied sheepishly.



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NICOLAS FREELING

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Beginning a new series about Van der Valk, the humanistic detective, the concerned criminologist, the one who cares, the one who can look at both sides of the coin—and sometimes makes the unconventional, the unorthodox decision . . .

VAN DER VALK AND THE FALSE CAESAR

by NICOLAS FREELING

"Now look," said Van der Valk quietly across his desk, "a simple unsupported charge of hanky-panky is not enough—if the police listened every time they got that there'd be no end to it. I'm not saying for an instant you might be acting from malice or spite, but you do see my point, huh? An official inquiry, casting doubt on a death, is already very serious. Then publicity, gossip, conjecture—not to mention a charge of false prosecution."

"I know," said the young man helplessly. "But it's too much for me. My father gathered and ate mushrooms for thirty years—and then suddenly he dies from eating mushrooms. It's just too big for me to swallow. I cannot—I will not—believe in a mistake."

Van der Valk stared at him for a long minute, then slowly took a piece of paper, slowly unclipped his pen, and stabbed the air with it. "Make a statement—only the things of which you are reasonably certain. Sign it. If it should later show untruth or distortion you could be in big trouble—you accept that?"

"Yes," the young man said resignedly.

"And if anything does show up, and if I decided to act on it, you realize the very heavy responsibility you would be taking on? You've really weighed all the possible consequences? . . . Very well, I'll take

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your statement and it will be carefully studied, but that's all I can promise you. Now, you say your father ate these mushroom dishes often. Did anybody ever share them?"

"I did, usually. Only that night I wasn't there. Nobody else ever did—they had a terror of them."

"He cooked the mushrooms himself?"

"As a rule, yes. Sometimes she did, if he were tired or busy. This time she did."

"And which mushrooms were they, exactly?"

"One only. A Caesar. A big Caesar—best there is. He was very proud of having found it."

"He told you that?"

"He was in coma when I arrived. She told me—but I recognized it. Huge orange thing."

"But an amanita?"

"A perfectly safe amanita. I've had them before, though not often."

"He had nausea, you say, and drunkenness. Then he fell asleep?"

"Yes. He behaved as though he were drunk. But I called the doctor—he'd had no more than usual, a small bottle of burgundy. The doctor said yes, it might be muscarine poisoning, and he injected atropine. He said there was a serum but that it was difficult to get—antiphalline. He came back about four hours later—he'd been everywhere for it. But by the time the doctor returned it was too late. I don't blame him; he did his best."

"So your father died, in a drunken heavy sleep passing into coma, about ten to twelve hours after eating. Very well. Now tell me—"

Ordinarily Van der Valk never mentioned his work at home. But Arlette was something of a mushroom expert herself—Frenchwoman, countrywoman. She would be interested.

"Sounds very queer. An expert wouldn't make a mistake like that. There is a false orange, a false Caesar—two in fact, the flykiller and the panther. But anybody with experience can tell the difference."

"What about the phalloids?"

"Entirely different—they're pale, brownish or greenish. There's a safe pale one, but it's difficult to tell—and a good red one too which is very like the panther. But not a Caesar—you'd need to be really stupid to mistake a wicked amanita for a Caesar."

"Is the poisoning always the same?"

"No, not a bit. The phalloids are the horrible ones—destroy

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your liver. Doesn't show for about twelve hours and then it's too late. You die about three days later. There is a serum."

"Yes, the doctor tried to get the serum. But he couldn't."

"He doesn't know mushrooms. The panther isn't phalline at all, so the serum's irrelevant, no use at all. And you die much quicker—in a few hours and in a coma. Muscarine, I think, and it's easier to treat. If you get the doctor in time you don't die at all."

"Know what the treatment is?"

"Atropine, I believe."

"Yes, that checks. That's what the doctor gave him."

"Wait a moment," said Arlette slowly. "I'm trying to remember something. I think I've heard that if you're poisoned with a panther or a flykiller, then atropine is all wrong—makes it even worse. You better look it up."

"A Dutch doctor might not know that."

"A French one might not know it either—unless he were a countryman."

Van der Valk got all the tomes out and spent an hour studying. "True enough. Here in the natural history book. There's a muscarine syndrome, and for that the treatment is atropine. But there's also a panther syndrome, and for that atropine is bad. But it's confusing, because the panther also contains muscarine. The phalloids are quite different, of course."

"Nobody would mistake a phalloid for a Caesar," insisted Arlette. "I don't even see how anyone could mistake a panther for a Caesar."

"Would getting the wrong treatment kill him?"

"Of course not—but it wouldn't stop him from dying either."

"What about *after* the mushroom was cooked? You couldn't tell then, could you?"

"I don't know," said Arlette simply. "I've never cooked one."

"I asked about it—thought you'd be interested. Done in oil—with tomatoes, garlic, parsley."

"Then it would be impossible to tell," she said with certainty. "It would go yellowish orange—yes, it would look like a Caesar."

It *might* have been an accident of treatment—and one couldn't accuse a doctor of not recognizing the false Caesar. It *might* have been a mistake—when old, Arlette had said, or after rain, the colors were much the same, but an experienced picker would never have taken the risk. And it was possible—

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possible—that a panther had been substituted for the Caesar.

Only an exhumation order would decide—and Van der Valk could see the magistrate's face if he came up with that rigamarole! And there would always remain the doubt—the victim *might* have picked the panther himself.

It was better, was it not, that a murderer go free than that innocent people, and a doctor who had done his best, should all have their lives ruined? Wasn't it?

Certainly it was. Once Van der Valk started it would be impossible to stop. Exactly like a bobsled run. Which killed people too, sometimes.

"Oddly enough I've mushrooms for supper," said Arlette.

"Not tonight. I know I'm being childish—but not tonight."

And she mourned all evening, because of the waste.

CRIMINALIMERICK

DUTCH UNCLE II

by D. R. BENSEN

When Amsterdam's foggy and cold,
A crook may grow frisky and bold
Till a grim, quiet talk
With the good Van der Valk
Leaves him shaken and feeling quite old.

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a NEW San Sebastiano story by

JAMES POWELL

Those of you who are familiar with San Sebastiano (that utterly strange principality which "stepped full-born from the heart" and mind of James Powell) would expect San Sebastiano to have an unusual—no, a unique—prison. And indeed it has. Join the warden, Alfred Panache, and his guest, Charles Dobbin, the famous travel writer, on a visit to the Chateau Gai and its, to say the least, strange inmates—including, among others, Dr. Emile Talon, the Abbe Ferox, Navarre, and the Man in the Iron Boot.

A completely unclassifiable story—as is true of nearly every story that James Powell has written for EQMM—insinuating, deceptive, tantalizing, at times even infuriating—until the denouement reveals and connects and interlocks . . .

TROPHY DAY AT THE CHATEAU GAI

by JAMES POWELL

The Ministry of Tourism's reception for Charles Dobbin took place in the tiny Giordano Room of the Winter Palace. After all, the author of *The Lure of New Jersey* and *The Oslo Nobody Knows*, to mention only two of his books, was hardly a travel writer of the first rank.

Dobbin stood in the middle of the room and tried to look accessible. But no one approached him and finally he turned his attention to the ornate ceiling painted by Guido Giordano. The artist had depicted Boniface Tancredi, the founder of the Royal House of San Sebastiano, in the act of stepping full-born from the heart of a Cabbage and bearing in one hand the Sword of Justice and in the other the Sword of Mercy. At his side, stepping equally full-born from the heart of a Rose, was his beautiful consort, Ghislaine of Valence. The motif of the Cabbage and the Rose en-

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twined, the national emblem of the principality, was repeated around the border molding.

"May an admirer introduce himself, Mr. Dobbin?" said a tall lean-faced man in a double-breasted suit. "My name is Alfred Panache." Mr. Panache carried a brief case and a dove-gray homburg in one hand. Obviously he had just arrived.

"You're very kind," said Dobbin with a polite smile, knowing he had no real admirers, except perhaps his mother who enjoyed his books or said she did.

"We're all looking forward to your new book on our little principality," said Panache. "Personally I hope it's something in the style of your *Fun Days and Nights in Labrador.*" Then to Dobbin's surprise and delight Panache launched into a detailed tribute to the book in question at the conclusion of which he said earnestly, "Mr. Dobbin, could I prevail on you to lecture us on your travels? You see, I am the warden of the Chateau Gai Prison, and all the prisoners are great fans of yours."

"*All* the prisoners?" said Dobbin, struggling to conceal his pleasure. "But I'm really not much of a public speaker."

"I can't believe that," insisted Panache. "You write with such clarity and strength. And wit," he added with a twinkle. "I particularly liked your description of the Labrador Retriever as a 'fetching animal.'"

Dobbin lowered his eyes. "I rather liked that one myself," he said.

A uniformed postman, the only other passenger on the ten-minute trip from the mainland, walked his bicycle down the gangplank ahead of Dobbin, touched his cap to Panache who was waiting on the jetty, and pedaled off toward the prison gate.

"Delighted you came," said the warden, shaking Dobbin's hand. "As I said, the prisoners will certainly look forward to a Trophy Day that includes a talk by their favorite author."

"I thought I'd recount my misadventures while writing *Sahara Saraband*," said Dobbin. "Sunstroke, getting lost in a particularly noxious corner of the desert called The Devil's Armpit, and a brush with Bedouin tribesmen that cost me a brand-new bicycle and almost my life."

Panache frowned at these words. But Dobbin didn't notice. He was awed by the walls of the Chateau Gai which rose up from the water's edge to crowd the afternoon sky.

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"Eleventh Century?" he asked.

"Twelfth," said Panache absently, as they started down the jetty. "Built as a defense against the Moors." His voice fell into the flat patter of a tour guide. "The Chateau Gai received its present name during the Captain-Generalcy. In 1625 when Martin Corbeau, Captain-General of the army of San Sebastiano, converted to Calvinism and drove the dissolute Prince Raoul II into exile, he used the castle to imprison all opponents of his strict, puritan regime—the punster, the epicure, the fashion plate. Often, while the principality slumbered in righteous, God-fearing darkness, the castle blazed with lights and echoed with laughter as elegant men and beautiful ladies danced far into the night. Today the North or 'Black' Tower is famous for its fine collection of instruments of torture. It also contains the cell where the celebrated Man in the Iron Boot lived out his tragic days."

"The Man in the Iron what?" asked Dobbin.

"Legend has it that at the Battle of Lepanto, Didier, eldest son of Prince Waldemir, was betrayed into the hands of the Moors by Lothair, his own younger brother. Years later Didier escaped and returned to San Sebastiano to find Lothair on the throne. But before Didier could reveal himself to the people, Lothair had him imprisoned here. The Iron Boot is supposed to have concealed the sixth toe on the left foot, the mark of the Royal House of San Sebastiano."

The postman cycled by, on his way back to the boat. Panache and Dobbin started up the incline toward the prison gate. The warden smiled. "Some believe the melancholy ghost of the Man in the Iron Boot still clumps our corridors, denied the peace of the grave until the day a prisoner escapes from the Chateau Gai."

"You mean no one ever has escaped?" asked Dobbin.

Panache shook his head. "Though last year the prisoner Pirelli almost left us, riding a hot-air balloon pasted together from the Sunday edition of *The New York Times* which our library subscribes to because of its fine Travel section. Fortunately a guard on the wall had the presence of mind to shoot the balloon right through the Hammacher Schlemmer ad."

They reached the gate. It was massive oak, studded with iron Cabbages and Roses. Panache rang a bell and a small window in the gate blinked open. They waited, Dobbin smiling awkwardly at the

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window. After a minute Panache said, "Perhaps if you'd take your hand out of your pocket, Mr. Dobbin. They may think you're holding a gun on me." Dobbin did as he was told. "Good. Good," approved the warden. "And now, if you'd just raise your arms over your head. Slowly." Dobbin obeyed. A narrow door in the gate clicked open.

Panache and Dobbin stepped through into a dark tunnel at the far end of which, beyond a gate of iron bars, was a sun-filled courtyard. Two guards holstered their pistols and frisked Dobbin. "Security's my great preoccupation," explained Panache apologetically. After the guards had poked through Dobbin's overnight bag, the warden led him to the courtyard where more guards, with clipboards and sweatshirts bearing the name "Chateau Gai Prison," were officiating as a group of gray-clad prisoners competed in the pole vault. "A healthy mind in a healthy body," remarked Panache.

"Somehow your charges don't look like criminal types," said Dobbin.

"Correct," said Panache proudly. "Not a desperado among them. Our prisoners are all former bureaucrats and politicians." Panache smiled at Dobbin's confusion. "San Sebastiano has two political parties—the Blues and the Pinks," he explained. "Since neither represents anything even vaguely smacking of ideology, corruption in office is always the principle election issue. In the old days when the Blues, for example, ousted the Pinks from power they would pack the Pinks off to jail in wholesale lots on charges of accepting bribes, misuse of public funds, et cetera, et cetera. And of course they would free all the Blues who had been jailed on similar charges when the Pinks had come to power."

"A system that jails politicians can't be all bad," said Dobbin.

"True," said Panache. "But in times of turmoil, with governments falling left and right, the heavy traffic of politicians in and out of our prison threatened a breakdown of national life. So our leaders came up with the Scapegoat Compromise: each time the government falls, the ousted party selects a single member to bear the burden of its collective guilt. The one chosen is sentenced to life imprisonment here at the Chateau Gai without hope of pardon or parole.

"But come," said Panache, unlocking a steel door to reveal a flight of steps. "First, if you

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don't mind, we'll stop by my office for a moment. Then, when you've freshened up, I'll give you a tour of the Chateau Gai."

But Dobbin was still watching the prisoners. "If they're all here for life, why the interest in travel books?" he asked.

Panache shrugged and led the way up the stairs. "Perhaps because I won't allow them to read anything else. While we're on the subject, might I make a suggestion regarding your talk?" Before Dobbin could answer, Panache gave a short cry, staggered, and almost fell. "It's nothing, nothing," he assured Dobbin breathlessly. "I stepped on—on—" He fumbled around in the shadows. "On this," he said bitterly, producing a flashbulb. Cursing politely, he sent the flashbulb bouncing hollowly down the steps and limped upward.

As they reached the top of the stairs an old man in a black cassock stepped out of a doorway where he seemed to have been hiding. He snapped a flash camera to his eye but then lowered it again with an expression of profound disappointment.

Panache muttered darkly under his breath and took Dobbin's arm. "You really must meet Dr. Emile Talon, the prison medical officer," he said hastily. Opening the first door on the right without knocking, Panache pushed Dobbin gently but firmly inside.

At a desk sat a fat purple-faced man with a full mustache who was in the act of raising a water tumbler to his lips. He started and spilled part of the contents on his white jacket. The room suddenly smelled of brandy.

"My dear Talon," said Panache, "excuse me for bursting in on you like this. But I knew you'd want to meet Mr. Dobbin, the famous author." As Talon gave Dobbin a plump hand to shake, footsteps could be heard in the hall. The doctor's watery eyes stared over Dobbin's shoulder until the footsteps had passed away.

"That's only our venerable chaplain, the Abbé Ferox," explained Panache.

Talon nodded. "Let me ask Mr. Dobbin something," he said. "Mr. Dobbin, for years now the Abbé Ferox has been trying to confront the ghost of the Man in the Iron Boot, but always the ghost eludes him. Always the heavy tread is just around the corner or just ahead of him on the stairs. Now you and I, as sophisticated, worldly men, know there is no such thing as a ghost. So if it isn't the Man in the Iron Boot our chaplain hears, who is it?"

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"It's no use, Talon," said the warden. "I haven't told Mr. Dobbin your story yet."

"I should have thought you would have by now," said the doctor in a hurt voice. "It's a tragic tale—the kind authors like."

Panache had opened the door a crack. Peering out into the hall he said, "All clear, Mr. Dobbin. Shall we let the doctor get back to his important work?"

Talon finished the brandy in his glass, wiped his mustache, and peered down at the papers on his desk. "Ah, yes," he said. "Here's an interesting fact which perhaps you can use in a book sometime. The average height of our prisoners has increased two inches in the past ten years."

"Don't judge our doctor too severely on that encounter, Mr. Dobbin," said Panache, thumbing through the drawer of a filing cabinet in his office. "He's a better doctor drunk than most doctors are sober. But I'm afraid the Abbé Ferox and all his stalking around after the Man in the Iron Boot has put an idea into Talon's head."

Panache drew out a manila folder, skimmed through it, and continued, "There was once a scoundrel named Navarre who seduced Talon's sister and abandoned her with child. He also swindled Talon's father out of the family fortune and drove the old man to suicide. Then one day Navarre collapsed from a massive brain tumor. There was only one surgeon skilled enough to attempt the operation."

"You mean Talon killed this Navarre under the knife?"

Panache shook his head. "No. Talon aspired to one of the greatest of human pleasures—to have his enemy's life in his hands, to do everything humanly possible to save it and yet to have his enemy die. The doctors in attendance say he drove himself to the outermost limits of the surgical art. In fact, only one thing went wrong with his plan: Navarre survived and is now living in luxury in Switzerland."

"But what is the connection between Navarre and the Man in the Iron Boot?" asked Dobbin.

"Didn't I mention Navarre's clubfoot?" said Panache.

"You mean that Dr. Talon believes Navarre is here?"

"I'm afraid so," said Panache absently. Then he tapped the folder. "If you'll excuse me I must speak to the doctor about the prisoner Pirelli's record."

Panache left Dobbin to examine the reproductions of Gauguin's Tahitian paintings on

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the walls. After a moment Dobbin heard new footsteps in the hall. Then the door opened and the man in the cassock stepped quickly inside.

"Mr. Dobbin," he whispered, "I am the Abbé Ferox. I believe that in a matter as important as this I may speak to you without our being formally introduced. I beg you, don't be deceived by Panache. He is an evil man. He is playing a cruel game with the prisoners. He tortures them. He tears them apart."

The Abbé pounded his fist in his hand, triggering the flash mechanism on his camera. Dobbin blinked and shook his head. "A thousand pardons," said the Abbé, fumbling in the folds of his cassock for another flashbulb. "I'm afraid I have a loose connection. But I must be ready at all times to come face to face with a certain tormented specter."

The Abbé tapped his camera significantly. "Then they'll have to believe me about the warden as well." Steps sounded in the hall. "Panache mustn't find us together," whispered the Abbé. Laying a finger on his lips he ducked into a closet, only to pop out again. "Were you ever a Boy Scout?" he asked.

"Yes," said Dobbin, "but—" The Abbé closed the closet door, triggering the flash as he did. The crack under the door glowed with light and the Abbé called some saint by name. A moment later Panache came into the room.

The warden's living room was bright with Oriental rugs and snug with overstuffed chairs and sofas. Heavily barred French doors opened out onto a small balcony that overlooked the courtyard. Dobbin stood watching the prisoners trot in a pack around the base of the wall. From another room Panache's voice could be heard, its cadence patient and soothing, as though speaking to an invalid. Dobbin had dismissed the Abbé Ferox's charges. After all, the man saw ghosts—or wanted to see them. Nevertheless his encounter with the chaplain had been unsettling.

"My wife sends her regrets, Mr. Dobbin," said Panache, closing the door behind him. "She doesn't feel quite up to joining us at the moment."

"I hope it's nothing serious," said Dobbin.

"A heart condition aggravated by deep-seated feelings of anxiety—at least, that's how Dr. Talon would describe it," said Panache. "What he means is that twice my wife almost died, once from shame and once from fear." Panache smiled sadly. "Mr. Dobbin," he said,

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"picture a certain indolent young man bred to the life of the country squire—late breakfasts, afternoon strolls around the estate, evenings drowsing over a book before the fire. Then one day he meets a beautiful young girl and falls in love. But her father is a frozen fish baron, a humble squid peddler who hacked and slashed his way to the top of the heap. With such a father how could she love an idler, someone who couldn't make his own way in the world?

"So the young man changed—at least, I thought I'd changed. With my new father-in-law's backing I made rapid advancement in the Foreign Service. And yet there was a part of me that was still the country squire. Sometimes, as I sat at my desk, my soul would leave my body and roam the countryside with my pack of Riviera Snake Terriers.

"Then came a certain diplomatic dinner in the summer of 1939. In charge of the seating arrangement I let my mind wander and absently sat the German Ambassador on the Polish Ambassador's left and set the Beluga caviar on the table to the Polish Ambassador's right." Panache shook his head. "A childish mistake. The old Pole was deaf in his left ear, and the German was inordinately fond of caviar. So his 'Pass the Beluga!' fell on a deaf ear. To make a long story short, the next day I was demoted to the Ministry of Justice. My wife, who was away in Paris attending a world conference of women who wanted their husbands to become heads of state, collapsed from a heart attack when she heard the shameful news.

"During my next few years at the Ministry of Justice I strove to crush the dreamer within. And eventually I was appointed warden here. Perhaps you can see why no one must escape from the Chateau Gai, Mr. Dobbin. The disgrace would kill my wife. The doctors say she couldn't survive a third heart attack." Panache picked up his brief case. "Well, shall we begin our tour?"

"You mentioned two heart attacks," said Dobbin, following him out the door.

"The second was several years ago when she learned that our good friend Raymond Benoit had been chosen as the Scapegoat," said Panache. They had reached the top of another flight of stairs. Panache unlocked a steel door and they stepped out to the sunlit ramparts. "You see," continued the warden, "Benoit is a master of escape, a talent which revealed itself when he and I

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were members of the Nightshirts, San Sebastiano's Second World War Resistance group. Benoit would let himself be captured and then lead mass escapes from the dreaded Gestapo prison in the Hotel Malatesta—sometimes as many as three or four times a day."

Halfway across the ramparts Panache stopped and nodded down at the prisoners trotting in the yard below. "Simulated cross-country run, free style," he said. "We also have a simulated cross-country run with leg irons which is much more grueling. They're both main events on our Field Day." He shook his head. "The prisoners don't seem to be putting their backs into it, do they? I'm afraid morale's at a low ebb. I was hoping your speech might cheer them up. But I wonder if sandstorms, Bedouins, and The Devil's Armpit will do the trick."

"You've lost me," said Dobbin.

"I rather hoped you'd emphasize the positive side of a travel writer's life—the freedom to go where one pleases, to follow the sun and the migrating birds, to drink deeply of the oneness of man and nature in the great outdoors."

Dobbin turned away. "Considering they're prisoners here for the rest of their lives, mightn't that be rather cruel?" he said.

Panache regarded Dobbin thoughtfully. Just then they were both distracted by a figure on the opposite rampart. It was the Abbé Ferox, holding a pink and blue flag—the flag of San Sebastiano—in each hand. Now Dobbin understood the Boy Scout reference, for as they watched, the Abbé began to signal with the flags in semaphore. Letter by letter, the message took shape: "Who groans at night from the Black Tower? Is Madame Panache really alive? Why do the prisoners fear Panache? P.S.: Panache and Talon are thick as thieves."

"Can you read semaphore, Mr. Dobbin?" asked the warden casually.

"No," said Dobbin, not exactly sure why he lied.

Signaling the end of the message, the Abbé tucked the flags under his arm and scurried off across the other rampart. He was followed a moment later by a portly man in a white jacket, walking a bit unsteadily. Dr. Talon.

"A tedious man, the Abbé Ferox," observed Panache.

"This is the prison proper," said Panache as they stepped through a tower door. With a loud clang a sallow-faced guard

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closed the door behind them and locked it with much rattling of keys. Panache gestured up a staircase. "The Black Tower and the Man in the Iron Boot's cell which is now occupied by Raymond Benoit," he said. "Perhaps we can visit them later."

Dobbin shivered as they started downward. The walls gave off a chill as though the stones had turned to iron. "You will note from now on that doors clang, hinges creak, and the keys are absurdly large," said Panache. "This is to impress the inmates that they are prisoners here, not permanent guests at a luxury hotel, as my predecessor preferred them to believe." Dobbin felt a vague uneasiness as they passed along corridors lit by harsh, caged bulbs, down narrow twists of stairs, and through thick, fat-bolted, heavily locked doors.

The cell block was a row of doors. Through small barred windows Dobbin could see the occupants, each a study in concentration. Some paced up and down, others stared at the wall, furrowed their brows, or sat with their heads in their hands. Panache nodded at each window with satisfaction. "Those prisoners who aren't competing in the athletic events are having their meditation period," he explained.

A few cells farther on Panache stopped again and sighed with exasperation. "Now if we were half blind, Mr. Dobbin," said Panache loudly, "we might mistakenly conclude that the prisoner Stocke is under those covers there. But obviously we are looking at a crude dummy with a hairbrush for hair. Yes, Stocke is up to his old tricks again. He is either hiding under his cot or to one side of the door ready to surprise and overpower the guard. This ruse and its variations are so basic that in my training lectures to new guards I refer to it as Routine Number Two. And if you could overpower a guard, Stocke, what then?" called Panache. "There are other guards and other doors to get through."

"I'd have thought of something," said a sheepish voice close to the cell window.

Panache gave a cynical laugh. "Get back to meditating, Stocke."

"Meditating on what?" asked Dobbin as they moved on.

"Obviously what all prisoners should meditate on," said Panache, unlocking one of the cell doors. Inside, a distinguished-looking prisoner with graying temples leaped to his feet. "Quarterly report time, Pirelli,"

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said Panache, coming in and setting his brief case on the tiny cell table. "Do you mind if Mr. Dobbin, the famous author, joins us?"

"Not at all," said Pirelli, plainly grateful for any reason to avoid Panache's gaze. "I enjoyed Mr. Dobbin's *Romany Rambles Through the Republic of Chad* very much," he said.

Panache sat down, pulled the manila folder from his brief case, and leafed slowly through it, shaking his head with displeasure. "Hardly a record to be proud of, Pirelli," he said at last. Then he turned to Dobbin. "In his first ten years here, Pirelli tried to escape thirty-three times. I think I mentioned the hot-air balloon made out of the Sunday edition of *The New York Times.*" Panache looked at the prisoner with admiration. "A good try, Pirelli," he said. "But that was a year ago and you haven't made another escape attempt since. What's wrong?"

Pirelli shrugged and looked at the floor. "If Benoit can't escape from the Chateau Gai, then nobody can," he said.

"But Benoit isn't even trying any more," said Panache. "That's why he's in solitary. Must I take stronger measures with you?" frowned Panache, uncapping his pen. Pirelli squirmed. After a moment Panache sighed and took some photographs from the folder. "I had dinner with your charming daughter and her husband last week," he said, handing the photos over. "Afterwards I took these. A delightful family scene, don't you think?"

Pirelli stared hungrily at the pictures. The warden made no attempt to hurry him except to say, "Little Sara wonders why her grandfather no longer writes that he may visit her soon."

Pirelli finally nodded. "There has to be a way," he said decisively.

Panache closed the folder and stood up. "Good, Pirelli! I'm counting on you. I know you won't let me down."

The Torture Chamber was no less ominous because the thumbscrews, manacles, and pincers for tearing flesh from bones were laid out and labeled in glass cases or that the branding irons were arranged alphabetically in display cabinets. It was still a chamber of horrors. A poker lay among fresh ashes in the massive brazier that dominated the center of the room. Along one wall were a number of what looked like mummy cases arranged by size. "Iron maidens," said Panache, swinging one open on well-oiled hinges to reveal the spiky interior. By

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the solitary window stood the rack, a bed of thick planks with crank-operated drums at the head and foot, and bright new leather straps.

"You're silent, Mr. Dobbin," said Panache.

"I am a bit confused," said Dobbin cautiously. "You almost sound as if you *want* the prisoners to escape."

"Not at all," said Panache vigorously. "But I do expect them to *try*. After all, I'm responsible for their mental well-being as well as their physical. Can a man's mind be healthy if he doesn't want to be free—free to go where he wants to go, be what he wants to be? Man should, after all, either be free or striving to be free. When I first arrived here as warden, I was ashamed, Mr. Dobbin. The inmates had traded their freedom for a mess of pottage—for playing cards in the sun with guards, for little theater groups and oratorical societies, for singsongs in the refectory on rainy days. I set about to remedy the situation even if it meant—"

"—taking stronger measures?" interrupted Dobbin.

"Even if it meant doing certain things which polite society might consider despicable," said Panache.

Dr. Talon appeared in the doorway. "A prepriandial aperitif?" he asked thickly. Dobbin was happy to accept, eager to leave a room he found oppressive. To his disappointment Talon swung open the largest Iron Maiden to reveal a well-stocked bar.

"Dr. Talon spends a great deal of time here," explained Panache. "He is the curator, so to speak, of our little collection."

Talon nodded. He poured the drinks, drained his own in a single draught, and poured himself another. "Perhaps Mr. Dobbin finds it strange that a doctor should be interested in instruments of torture," he said.

"Opposites attract," said Dobbin with an uneasy smile.

"Even more than that," said Talon, "opposites become one another. The hunter becomes the hunted. The warden becomes the prisoner. The surgeon becomes the cutthroat." Talon tapped one of the display cases. "You know, as morbid as their trade was, the torturers often possessed a certain wry humor. These silver thumbscrews, for example, were only used when the victim was of our nobility. They are set with sardonyx, a stone which was supposed to ward off pain. Just get up here on the rack, Mr. Dobbin, and I'll show you something else."

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Dobbin laughed nervously, as though the doctor had made a very small joke. Both Talon and Panache smiled. Smiles of menace? Dobbin wasn't sure. But all of a sudden they seemed to be crowding him. "Please, Mr. Dobbin," said Panache, gesturing at the rack, "our doctor is so proud when he can show off the collection."

Dobbin sat on the edge of the rack and swung his feet up, not wanting to look the fool by refusing, not wanting to shatter the thin layer of politeness for fear of what he might find beneath. Quickly and expertly Talon buckled a strap around each ankle. "I've set this as if you were five centimeters taller than you actually are," he said, raising Dobbin's wrists up over his head and buckling them into straps as well. "That way I can make my point without causing you any discomfort."

Talon tossed off another drink and then threw his weight against the crank at the head of the rack. Cogs clacked into place and Dobbin felt himself being pulled back and—because of the tilt of the rack—upward. "Now look straight out the window and tell me what you see," said Talon.

"Blue sky," said Dobbin, wishing he were somewhere else.

"Good," said Talon, like an approving optometrist.

A half crank more and the slack in the ankle straps had disappeared. Dobbin laughed nervously. "I hope this isn't why your prisoners are averaging two inches taller," he said.

Panache smiled. Talon turned the crank. "What do you see now?" he asked.

"The dome of the Casino is a little bit to the left," said Dobbin, feeling his body draw tense.

"Good," said Talon, returning to the crank.

Dobbin was beginning to have trouble breathing. Panache leaned over him. "Mr. Dobbin," he said quietly, "I've been meaning to ask you to reconsider the theme of your lecture."

"What do you see now?" said Talon.

"The neon sign," gasped Dobbin. "The one on the roof of the Hotel Adalbert I, the one that says: *Eat Momwrath Cheese.*"

Talon muttered, "Good," and to Dobbin's relief he stopped cranking. "Centuries ago, before that sign was built, the victim on the rack was given a perfect view of the statue of Blind Justice on top of the Courthouse in those brief seconds just before he was torn limb from limb. Of course, today what do you see?" added

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Talon bitterly. "*Eat Momwrath Cheese!* It's hardly the same thing. Today there is no justice." Talon emphasized this last remark by giving the crank a quarter turn. "Today the good are victimized and the evil limp the world as free men." The crank turned.

Dobbin squirmed. He could see the turrets of the Winter Palace now where, on the ceiling of the Giordano Room, Boniface Tancredi and his beautiful consort were popping out of their respective Cabbage and Rose in much the same way Dobbin imagined his bones were soon going to pop out of their sockets. Panache was leaning over him. "About your lecture, Mr. Dobbin."

"We'll do it your way," said Dobbin breathlessly.

"Thank you," said the warden gratefully. He straightened up and frowned. "My dear doctor, you forget yourself," he said. "You're making Mr. Dobbin uncomfortable."

Talon stopped cranking and looked around with wild bewildered eyes. "He was here," he said. "Navarre was here and I had him on the rack. But even then there was no justice, only Momwrath Cheese." With a sigh the doctor reversed the crank and the straps at Dobbin's wrists and ankles went slack.

Panache tapped his knife on the water glass. The four long tables of prisoners with after-dinner cigars fell silent. "Now, gentlemen," said Panache, "we reach that point in the evening I know you've all been waiting for—the presentation of the awards." But before he could continue, the Abbé Ferox had risen in his place. He had spent the entire meal trying to send messages to Dobbin by tapping against his plate—one tap for A, two for B, and so on. It was a tedious message, full of Y's and Z's and X's, and Dobbin, whose mind was still in a turmoil from his experience on the rack, had closed his ears and gulped his wine. Now the Abbé had risen and was clearing his throat. Panache frowned and then said wearily, "But first our chaplain will say grace after meals." The prisoners rose and bowed their heads.

"Heavenly Father," droned the Abbé, "we thank you for this food which has strengthened our bodies. We thank you for the strength you have given our spirits as well, the strength to know there can be no real escape this side of the grave and to endure with happy resignation the terror and intimidation and other strong measures heaped on our heads by our lawful superiors.

"Send us, we pray, a man of

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courage who can return to the mainland and tell our story to Monsieur Fauret—that's F-A-U-R-E-T—the Inspector of Prisons, Room 402 in the Palais de Justice. Send us a man who can stop this inhuman game that certain people are forcing us to play for their own personal amusement. Send us a man who can discover why the warden will not let your humble servant visit his wife who—"

The prisoners were glancing at one another. One had even picked up his cigar and was puffing on it uneasily. The chaplain stopped and looked up. "If you please, prisoner Gaspard," he scolded, "we are at prayer." When Gaspard had put down his cigar the chaplain continued: "—his wife who I have every reason to believe has been done away with. Amen." Defying Panache with a look, the Abbé stalked out of the dining hall.

Panache launched at once into the presentation of the athletic awards until nothing remained but a large bronze trophy of a man raising a broken manacle triumphantly over his head.

"The Chateau Gai Freedom Trophy," announced Panache, "is awarded annually to the prisoner who makes the most imaginative escape attempt. This year's winner, though plagued by certain elements of the tragicomical—" A few snickers broke out among the prisoners. Panache furrowed his brow and continued severely: "—was not unworthy of the high level of escape attempts of which we of the Chateau Gai may be justly proud. I am speaking of course of the prisoner Robinet."

A dignified little man rose amid a mixture of applause and suppressed laughter. Blushing, but with his head held high, Robinet approached the main table.

Robinet had manufactured a complete guard's uniform from cardboard, paper bags, and some blue Easter egg dye left over from the annual Easter egg hunts staged by Panache's predecessor. He then attempted to march out of the prison with a contingent of off-duty guards returning to the mainland. Unfortunately he was caught in a cloudburst halfway across the courtyard. His cap came unstuck, his puttees unraveled, and his paper jacket and trousers literally disintegrated. He marched up to the inner gate naked and blue all over from the Easter egg dye. In desperation he tried to bluff his way through by waving a pistol carved from soap but it popped right out of his hand. He dove for the gun but it popped out

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of his hand again. And again. And again.

The thought of a sobbing blue man crawling around on his hands and knees in the pouring rain trying to snatch a soap gun was just too much for the prisoners. The warden glowered from table to table trying to silence the growing laughter. There were tears of shame in the corners of Robinet's eyes as he accepted the trophy and carried it back to his seat.

Furious, Panache pounded his fist until the prisoners fell silent. "At least Robinet *tried!*" shouted Panache. "That's more than I can say for the rest of you who seem to have reverted to the miserable condition in which I found you. My predecessor was not a warden. He was a gardener—and you were his vegetables!"

Panache stopped abruptly, struggling to control himself. Calm at last, he said, "Tonight we are fortunate to have with us a man who has traveled footloose and fancy-free throughout this wide world of ours. May his words be an inspiration to you all. Mr. Charles Dobbin."

Dobbin began with misgivings, not the least of which was the fact that he had discarded his Sahara misadventures and based his talk on the least successful of his books, *By Dugout and Litter Through the Rainforests of the Upper Amazon.* But soon he was caught up in his own story, perhaps because at that moment he would have given anything to be back up the Amazon, far beyond the Chateau Gai.

Suddenly the prisoner Robinet gave an incoherent shout, broke away from his table, and threw himself, butting and clawing, against the wall. Two guards hurried over, gently restrained the sobbing little man, and led him from the hall. Dobbin tried to continue, but the spell was broken. The prisoners muttered among themselves and shook their heads at each other. Dobbin concluded his talk abruptly. At a signal from Panache the dejected prisoners were led back to their cells.

Panache toyed with the stem of his wine glass. "An excellent talk, Mr. Dobbin," he said sadly. "But, alas, Robinet undid all the good, poor fellow. He's another reason for the shortage of escape attempts this year. The prisoners are afraid of making fools of themselves as he did. And yet—" Panache thought for a moment. "And yet, mustn't a man try to be free even if it means sacrificing the esteem of others?" He

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answered his own question with a crisp nod. "Yes, he must. Come, Mr. Dobbin. Drastic situations require drastic measures."

Dobbin followed the warden, still refusing to admit his fears. The cell of the Man in the Iron Boot was on the floor above the Torture Chamber. Raymond Benoit, a robust-looking man in his fifties, was stretched out on the bed with his hands behind his head.

"My dear Alfred," the prisoner said, sitting up and placing his feet on the floor, "how nice of you to come. For a prisoner in solitary confinement I certainly have enough visitors. If it isn't the Abbé Ferox asking me if I've seen or heard his foot-dragging ghost, it's the good doctor come to measure my height or carry on about that rascal Navarre."

Panache nodded pleasantly. "I've brought you some reading matter, Raymond," he said, holding up a book. "It's called *The Eyes of Darkness: The Posthumous Memoirs of Aglai, Duchess of Polenta.*"

Benoit's smile faded. "Don't presume on our friendship, Alfred," he warned.

"But you feature so prominently in it," said Panache, leafing through the pages.

"No," said Benoit sharply.

"Take this entry, for example," said Panache, "the one dated May 15, 1964: 'Blithe steps on the stairs, Benoit's quick knock, and my dear friend arrives for his daily visit. As always Bouchard has preceded him—Bouchard whom I always imagine dressed in black, sitting silent and erect in whatever shadow he can find. Both Bouchard and Benoit wear the Cabbage of the Blues in their lapels. But apart from politics, how completely different they are! Benoit is all light and sound. His shoe leather creaks like a galley, his linen is a walk in the park in the snow, his newspaper crackles in his hands like a brushfire. Bouchard is a stone wall—strong, protecting, always the same.

" 'But Benoit, with his anecdotes and his latest gossip from the Café Gavotte where he lunches without fail, is my window on life. Or was, for after today he will not come again. He had been reading the newspaper aloud. Guided by his voice I saw the front page—headlines, articles, pictures—in my mind's eye. But when he tried to move on to page two I stopped him. "You've skipped something," I said. He insisted he had not. "Come, my friend," I said. "You are my eyes. Do my own eyes deceive me?"

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" 'And so he read the missing news item: Raymond Benoit, Deputy Minister of Cultural Affairs in the outgoing Blue administration, had been indicted for misappropriation of public funds. "Benoit, the Scapegoat?" I laughed. "Impossible. You have no enemies, and you have powerful friends." "One makes enemies, one loses friends," said Benoit. Then I realized it wasn't a joke. "Bouchard," I said, "surely you or your father, the Senator, can—" But Benoit interrupted my plea. "There's nothing anyone can do," he assured me.

" 'And so Benoit left and for me it was like going blind a second time. Bouchard, my wall without windows, remained. He asked me to play for him and in my sadness I did, knowing that as the piano filled the room he would close his eyes and join me in my blindness. And yet—' "

"Why are you doing this, Alfred?" rasped Benoit. "After all, she has been dead for three years now."

"But Bouchard is alive," said Panache. "If you thought about it long enough, you might come to hate him for putting you here."

"I was his friend," said Benoit. "If he loved her enough to put me here, I hold no grudge. And if I didn't accuse him it was because with me gone she would need someone she could trust. Is there really any point in my thinking about it?"

"If you did, perhaps you'd want to escape and have your revenge," said Panache.

"So that's all this is," Benoit said contemptuously, "another of your little pep talks." He shook his head emphatically. "I don't hate Bouchard!"

"Perhaps if I were to come here every day and read you a bit from this book—"

"I wouldn't listen," insisted Benoit.

"I think you would," said Panache. "And in time you'd come to hate Bouchard. He's all through the book, you know, sitting in the shadows like Death personified."

"We were two men who loved the same woman," said Benoit angrily. "There wasn't any room for hatred between us. She'd never have allowed it." Benoit paused to show he was choosing his words with care. "Alfred," he said, "before I'd let you destroy that friendship I'd destroy you." He gestured significantly at the stones of the Chateau Gai.

Panache bowed as if he understood. He signaled through the window to the guard who unlocked the cell door.

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As they moved on, the warden said, "For your information, Mr. Dobbin, the strongest measure I ever take is simply to give the prisoners an 'unsatisfactory' deportment rating in their files." Dobbin's silence spoke disbelief. Panache shrugged. "I can see you don't understand the bureaucratic mind," he said. "For the bureaucrat, life is short, but files are long. And once there, an 'unsatisfactory' in one's file can never be removed. Three thousand years from now their peers, the bureaucrats of the future, can open that file and read it."

All of a sudden Dobbin believed him.

Panache and Dobbin sat on a balcony of the warden's apartment with the brandy decanter between them. Below, the exercise yard was a pool of light at the bottom of the black night sky. A double line of prisoners marched into the yard carrying folding chairs, while above them, on the roof of the prison proper, guards were lowering a large white screen. Other guards stood in twos and threes against the walls and watched as the prisoners began to arrange their chairs into a tight square.

"No Trophy Day would be complete without a movie," said Panache, a bit sadly. He had been downcast since their visit to Benoit, as though ashamed of what had taken place.

"A pity Madame Panache doesn't feel up to joining us," said Dobbin, anxious to show he had dismissed all the chaplain's charges.

It was time for the movie to begin. The floodlights on the walls blinked off. Searchlights on each of the towers took their places and roved back and forth across the yard. The movie was set on Death Row and starred Humphrey Bogart in the role of the tough, tight-lipped killer. The cast also included the wise old convict, the country boy sentenced to death for a crime of passion, the Negro prisoner who sang spirituals, the brutal guard, the guard with a heart of gold, the ferret-faced informer, the ineffectual chaplain, and the harassed warden. As it happened, both Panache and Dobbin had seen the picture before. They drank and chatted quietly to themselves. When Bogart tried to choke the brutal guard against the bars and the audience broke into a cheer, Panache sighed and said, "You know, Mr. Dobbin, I sometimes wonder if human freedom is really worth it. It would be such an inspiration to the

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others if Benoit would try to escape."

Meanwhile it was night and raining on the screen and Bogart crouched in the shadows of the prison yard. Somewhere a siren announced his escape. Searchlights darted everywhere, probing for him in the darkness. And the searchlights of the Chateau Gai moved among the spellbound prisoners, making everything one with the screen.

Suddenly another siren, piercing and near, split the darkness and an electric bell began to clang throughout the Chateau Gai. Panache sat up rigidly in his chair for a moment and then dashed inside. The telephone rang just before he reached it. The floodlights had come on again. The prisoners stood up, blinking and confused, as more guards ran out into the yard, pulling on their coats as they came. Panache walked back out onto the balcony. His face reflected no emotion at all. "Benoit is not in his cell," he announced.

The guard stared down at the pattern in the Oriental rug. "About a half an hour after you left, sir, I looked in on the prisoner Benoit," he said. "He was in bed with the covers up over his head."

"You fell for Routine Number Two!" shouted Panache.

"I beg the warden's pardon, but I did not," said the guard. "The hair was quite obviously a hairbrush. Still, I knew how pleased you'd be that Benoit was at least trying to escape. I called through the window and told him as much. But he did not answer. A bit put out that he would try to deceive me with such a rudimentary trick, I opened the cell door—cautiously, to be sure, and ever mindful of your excellent instructions. He was neither to the left nor to the right of the door."

"Then he was under the bed," said Panache impatiently.

The guard nodded. "In fact, I could see a bit of his trousers," he said. "And getting down on all fours I stuck my head under the bed. 'Come out, prisoner Benoit,' I demanded. That's when I discovered the trouser leg under the bed was empty. In that same instant someone moved on the bed above me and a foot planted itself on my neck. Your excellent instructions notwithstanding, Warden, I had to allow myself to be disarmed and bound hand and foot."

"You mean to tell me that Benoit was hiding under the covers with a hairbrush on his head?" demanded Panache.

The guard nodded. "He took

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my key, even though I told him it would do no good," he said. "He went out into the hall and very deliberately he forced his foot down into my wastepaper basket. 'Give it up, prisoner Benoit,' I called. 'You can't escape from the Chateau Gai without your pants and with your foot stuck in a tin wastepaper basket.'

"He smiled apologetically and put a gag in my mouth. Then, much to my surprise, he started clumping up and down the hall. Every now and then he'd stop and listen for a moment and then he'd start clumping all over again. Suddenly I heard another voice from the other side of the door. It was our venerable chaplain, the Abbé Ferox.

"'I'm coming, I'm coming, my ghostly friend,' the Abbé shouted. 'Is it really you at last, your highness?' Or words to that effect. Suddenly I heard the chaplain call on the saints. 'Wait right there, your highness,' he pleaded. 'Please wait right there. I'll be right back.' But Benoit didn't wait. A moment later I heard him turn the key in the lock and clump out of earshot down the stairs."

"I think I can take up the story," muttered Dr. Talon sheepishly. "I must have dozed. Suddenly the Abbé Ferox was pounding on the door of the Torture Chamber, wild-eyed with excitement. Did I happen to have any spare flashbulbs? I told him I most certainly did not and he dashed off downstairs. A moment later I heard this clump, clump coming down from the floor above. I was confused. Could it be—? I struggled to see through the window.

"'Navarre,' I whispered. More clumping. 'Navarre, is that you?' The clumping stopped. 'Yes, it's me, Emile,' came this voice; 'open up.' Why did I unlock the door? It couldn't have been Navarre. We were hardly on a first-name basis. But I did. Benoit slipped into the room. Very gently but very firmly he pushed me back into my chair. Then he mulled me another tankard of port.

"I told him I'd thought he was Navarre and of all the terrible things Navarre had done to my family. But I could tell he wasn't listening. He was just standing there, looking round the room and very nervously running his fingers through his hair. I remember commenting that it was strange for him to have a wastepaper basket on his foot. But after all, these are topsy-turvy times we live in. The innocent are punished and the guilty live in luxury—"

"Go on," said Panache impatiently.

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"In any event," said the doctor, "the next thing I knew he had broken into the display cases and was hammering the manacles and leg irons into a long chain which he then proceeded to thread through the bars in the window and then back inside again. Then he wrapped the chain around one of the drums on the rack. He cranked up the rack until it tore the bars out of the window."

"All right," insisted Panache. "But it was still a good seventy feet to the water below."

"There were more manacles, more leg irons," said Talon. "He linked them all together and then he dropped the last thirty feet into the water. Personally, I find it ironic that he used the instruments of imprisonment and torture to make his escape."

"Escape?" said a woman's voice in the doorway. "What's this about escape?"

"Raymond Benoit has escaped from the Chateau Gai, my dear," said Panache, without turning to face the pale woman standing there in a yellow nightgown. The woman swayed and fell forward. "Doctor," said Panache, "if you'll take care of your patient, I'll notify the authorities ashore."

On deck of the small mailboat the mainland was growing larger through the early morning mist. Panache and Dobbin stood in the bow, sharing a flask of brandy which Dr. Talon had pressed on them before staggering off in pursuit of Navarre who, the doctor insisted, was responsible for everything—for the death of Madame Panache, the warden's dismissal, everything.

"Of course until my hearing I'm only suspended," said Panache, passing the flask to Dobbin with a polite if slightly crooked smile—the drinking, which had started as a necessary comfort during the raw crossing, had by now become a pleasure. Panache shook his head. "Alfred Panache," he said, "the first warden to allow a prisoner to escape from the Chateau Gai."

"I'm sorry," said Dobbin, after a long swallow.

"Ah, my friend," said Panache, staring down into the cold fast-flowing waters, "you shouldn't feel sorry for a man who has just enjoyed one of the greatest of human pleasures. Remember? We talked about that. To have your enemy's life in your hands, to do everything in your power to save it and yet to have her die. I dare anyone to say I haven't done my duty. Could any husband have been more solicitous? Could any

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warden have been more conscientious?"

Dobbin's voice was husky. "Then you knew all the time that someone would escape?"

"It was inevitable," said Panache. "I have too much respect for man's desire to be free to have believed otherwise."

Dobbin thought for a moment. "And now the prisoner Panache is free as well," he said.

Panache nodded. "It's been a great night for escapes," he said. "My wife escapes this vale of tears, the Man in the Iron Boot escapes the Abbé Ferox, Benoit escapes the Chateau Gai, and I escape from twenty years of trying to live someone else's life."

"What now?" asked Dobbin.

"Who knows?" said Panache. "You should always be a bit nervous when you get what you want." He gestured to port. "See those rocks over there? They're called The Three Bishops. Back in the days when the Norse longboats terrorized this coast, three holy men are supposed to have prayed to be changed into rocks to shipwreck the approaching raiders. Their prayers were granted. But at the last minute the Vikings decided to bypass San Sebastiano."

In fact, the rocks did resemble mitred heads shrouded in gray water and early morning mist and attended by a bobbing bell-buoy. But Dobbin saw something else in the water—a head and shoulders, arms clinging to one of the rocks. It was Benoit. The escaped prisoner stared at the boat defiantly, too tired or too proud to hide. "Look!" Before Dobbin could stop himself the word was out.

Panache was examining the starboard horizon. He didn't turn. "I remember it was in a sea such as this," he said, "that Benoit swam well out beyond the Chateau Gai to rescue some Nightshirts from the German prison ship, *Shutzmark*."

"Was his foot stuck in a wastepaper basket?" asked Dobbin.

Panache continued to stare to starboard. Then he smiled and, as if in answer to Dobbin's question, said, "Have you ever been to the Café Gavotte, Mr. Dobbin? Let's have lunch there this afternoon. They say the cordial atmosphere is quite conducive to smoothing over small differences and restoring damaged friendships."

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"And yet, wasn't that what war was all about? . . ."

JUST SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED

by R. L. STEVENS

It was in the autumn of '44, and we had grown weary of the battle. We'd swept the Germans from most of France and were pressing toward the Rhine with nothing but victory in sight. The Battle of the Bulge was still more than a month in the future, unknown and unsuspected.

It often happened in those days, with the enemy offering only token resistance, that a tank column would penetrate deep into German territory, capturing some tiny village and holding it even though enemy troops were retreating on both sides. It was dangerous to stretch our supply lines so thin, but with the open road ahead there was little to hold us back. The men wanted victory—a great rolling surging victory—to replace the smothering, stifling battles of the spring and summer that had brought with them only an utter weariness and a longing for home. Perhaps all wars are like that toward the end, for winner and loser alike.

I cannot remember the name of this particular village, because there were so many like it. We came down on it just at dawn, riding through the river mists like some thirsty dragons searching out water. I remember that the country lanes were deep with autumn leaves that must have crackled beneath the treads of our tanks, but we could hear nothing above the roar of the metal monsters. A few people were about, mostly peasants at their morning chores, and for a moment we could almost forget about the war that waited just beyond the next hill.

I took a few men and scouted the area, talking to an aged farmer who scratched his balding head and told us in broken English that the Germans had pulled back the previous evening. We had no reason to disbelieve him, and it was decided that we should remain in the village for 24 hours, giving our supply columns an opportunity to catch up while we rested. The fuel was in especially short supply as

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we reached the dangerous outer limits of our advance.

Toward evening, while some of the others took part in an improvised game of softball, I took my carbine and wandered off by myself. Perhaps it was a foolish thing to do, but we believed the enemy to be far off beyond the hill, and the autumn evening was one that reminded me of home. I wanted to see the view from the top of the next rise, to watch the sunset and imagine again that I was hunting on my uncle's farm back in Pennsylvania.

We had patrols out, of course, searching for signs of the enemy on the road ahead, but it seemed we had not been careful enough in the immediate area. Suddenly, standing there at the top of the hill, I spotted a German soldier not ten feet away. He had come to the top as I had, but not to watch the sunset. He was more interested in spying on the activities below. He must have seen me, of course, from some distance off—but he'd made no effort to escape or to use his weapon. Perhaps he was merely frozen by fear.

I was too close to aim the carbine, and in a reaction that was pure reflex I simply threw myself on him. My knee caught him in the back as he started to rise, pinning him flat, and I struggled to knock the rifle free from his fingers.

We grappled there in silence for a few moments, two spent warriors fighting for our lives, and then as I began to get the upper hand he gasped out, "Don't kill me! Don't!"

I suppose the familiar but unexpected words startled me, even though they were spoken in a thick German accent. I let up the pressure of my knee and rolled off him.

"Thank you," he said, panting for breath.

I brought up my carbine, backing off until I could aim it at his middle. "No tricks. You're my prisoner."

"Don't kill me," he repeated, seeing the gun. The ground was cold among the fallen leaves, and he was trembling.

"Where are the others?" I asked. "Where is your patrol?"

"Alone! I am alone!"

I had to admit there seemed no sign of anyone else, and I motioned him to his feet. "All right—start walking!"

"Cigarette—could I smoke a cigarette?"

Despite the beginnings of a beard on his weathered face I saw now that he was very young. Perhaps he was even younger than my boyish years, and certainly he could not have been much older. The charade

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of conflict, with its uniforms and mud and bloodied faces, made all men ageless, but in moments like this it was sometimes possible to detect the humanity lurking beneath the surface.

"You can have a cigarette back at camp," I said, keeping the carbine level. "Start walking—this way, over the hill."

"They'll kill me, won't they? Shoot me?"

"Of course not. You're a prisoner of war."

He began walking ahead of me, his hands on his head, but then suddenly he turned—so quickly that I almost shot him. "I can take you to the others," he said. "You can capture them."

"You said there were no others." It was growing dark and I feared some sort of trick.

"I show you. Make you a big hero!"

"How many are there?" The enemy was, after all, in retreat. If I could bring in a lot of prisoners it would look good on my record. It would be something to balance the indifference of my service till then. "How many?" I asked again.

"Many. I show you. They are ready to surrender."

"Where?"

He pointed off in the distance, toward a clump of trees on the other side of the river. It was merely a blur in the gathering twilight. "In the woods," he said. "Not far."

"How many?"

"Maybe twelve, fifteen."

"Too many for me alone," I told him. "I'll have to get help."

"Some are wounded. They will not fight."

"How do we get across the river?"

"It is shallow there. I show you where we walk across."

I studied the terrain in the fading light and pondered my next move. Another thirty minutes would bring total darkness, and if I returned for help there would not be time to capture the Germans before nightfall. If I played it safe, keeping under cover, I just might be able to round them all up and start them back while there was still some light. The way I figured it, the worst that could happen would be that my prisoner might escape in the confusion.

"All right," I told him finally. "I'll go with you if you can get them to come out of those woods."

He nodded eagerly. "I get them out." And then the expression on his face changed, ever so slightly. In that light I couldn't be certain if it was

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really a change at all. "If you do one thing for me."

"What?" I could see it coming. He wanted me to let him escape in return for betraying his buddies.

"A small favor, ever so small."

"What?" I repeated, leveling the carbine.

"Kill a man for me. A German."

"How's that again?" I could barely make out his features now, and I wasn't sure I'd understood the words.

"I only want you to kill a German. You do that every day. I will go down there to the woods and lure him out. Kill that one, and the rest of us will surrender."

"Who is he?" I asked.

"A man. No one important. It is a personal matter."

"Then kill him yourself."

The German brought his hands from his head momentarily, holding out the palms in a gesture of helplessness. "These things are not so easy. There are too many witnesses, and I do not trust the sureness of my hand in that final moment. I might fail in the attempt, and my enemy might live. But to you he is only a German. To you it would be nothing."

"Why do you want him dead?"

"I said it was a personal matter. A thing of no importance to you."

"A woman?" I was beginning to see a grim humor in the situation.

"A woman. That and other things. I know him a long time, back home." Then, with something like appeal, he asked again, "Will you do it?"

"Why should I? What's it to me?"

"I give you a dozen prisoners. I make you a hero. They will surrender if I say so."

"And you will say so?"

He nodded. "Once the man is dead."

In that moment I hadn't really decided what to do. But it was growing darker by the minute and I had to act. I motioned with my carbine. "Lead the way. I'll follow along behind. No funny stuff or you're a dead man."

We went down the hill, keeping close to the line of trees that bordered one side. There seemed no movement in the woods ahead, but I was ready to duck for cover at the first sign of a trap. He led me to the edge of the river, and then across it at a point where the water was only a few inches deep. There had been no rain in many weeks, he explained, stepping gingerly through the gentle current.

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Finally, when we reached the edge of the woods on the other side, he paused and whispered, "Wait here. Behind that rock. He will be the first man out, and I will see that he is unarmed. Kill him!"

I crouched as he'd instructed, and suddenly I was in the grip of an emotion I couldn't fully explain. I was going to kill this man. I knew it now, although I hadn't admitted it to myself until that moment. I was going to kill a man I didn't know, for a reason I didn't understand. And yet, wasn't that what war was all about?

After a moment I heard a voice calling something in German. In the near darkness I saw a figure in the uniform of the enemy appear at the edge of the woods. I couldn't see his face, but he was taller than my prisoner. He spoke again in German, softly, and I raised my carbine and shot him.

My first bullet struck his shoulder, and he wheeled in surprise, dropping to one knee. Then he turned toward me and pulled a bayonet from beneath his coat. I fired again and this time his whole body jerked and toppled backward.

After a moment my prisoner appeared. He bent over his fallen comrade. "Good. You are a good shot, American."

"Where are the others?"

"They hear the shots and run away."

"You mean they're gone?"

"But I do not run," he said. "I am your prisoner."

I walked to him and turned over the body with my foot. The body of the man I had killed. He was just a man, a young German like this other. Nothing special, certainly nothing unique. Only one more of the enemy.

I turned to my prisoner, raising the carbine again. "There were never any others, were there? Just the two of you, hiding here in the woods." He didn't answer, and I said, "I should kill you for this. I should kill you like I did him."

"I am your prisoner. You said you do not shoot prisoners."

We stood like that for another moment, frozen in our positions like statues in a gallery. Then, finally, I said, "All right. Get going before I change my mind."

"Going?"

"Run. I'm not taking you back as a prisoner."

"But—"

There were voices behind me, across the river. I thought I heard someone calling my name. My two shots had been heard back at camp. "Go on!" I told him.

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The German hesitated only a moment, then he quickly vanished among the trees. I called to the others and they crossed the river at the point I indicated.

"What happened?" the major asked. "We heard shots."

"I spotted two German soldiers and killed one. The other got away."

He stared down at the body and grunted. "All right. We'd better get back to camp. You shouldn't have been off by yourself."

Walking back through the high grass and fallen leaves I knew that I had not released the German out of any feeling of compassion. It was, rather, because I knew he could bear witness to my crime. Seeing him, seeing his face, was a reminder to me of what I had done.

Once, years later, in a crowded bar back in my hometown, somebody asked me if I had ever killed anyone in the war. For a long time I didn't answer, because I did not know what answer to give. Then, finally, I said, "There was one man, a German soldier. I especially remember him, because I murdered him."

"It's not murder in the war, fella," the man who'd asked the question told me. "It's just something that happens."

"Yes," I had to agree. "That's what this was—just something that happened. In the autumn, when we were all very tired."

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An unusual tale — about a world authority on the theory of numbers who "drew satisfaction from the predictability of life just as he drew his livelihood from the predictability of death"...

ONE CHANCE IN 100,000,000

by IRWIN ROSS

George Nesbitt watched the last golden patch of sunlight drift off the sheet of paper on his desk, reminding him that he ought to take his life. He thought about it for a few moments and then directed his attention back to the paper, which was an actuarial table of the life expectancy of farmers who use contour plowing.

Nesbitt had just completed the table and he was proud of his work. It represented the accumulated experience of his lifetime as an actuary, applied with particular care, since he firmly expected it to be his last work. Nesbitt's wife had died three years before and ever since he had devoted himself entirely to his profession. As Chief Actuary for the company and Past President of both the North American Actuarial Association and the International Actuary Federation, he was one of the most respected men in his field. And he wanted that respect, the respect of other actuaries, to live a long time after him.

Two years before, as a form of relaxation, Nesbitt had prepared a table of the life expectancy of actuaries themselves. The table indicated the probability that he would die in the present year of his life. He had found the information interesting; but his interest was purely academic. He had often explained the matter to laymen: actuarial tables show probabilities, they don't tell fortunes. However, during the next several months curiosity had prompted him to check his life expectancy whenever he examined a table that pertained to him: city dwellers from Maine; active businessmen earning more than $35,000 per annum; widowers who dine at home—in all, fourteen tables.

Every one of them agreed neatly and finally with the first. Probability had piled on prob-

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ability until a practical certainty had been reached. There could be no error in the tables—he had supervised the preparation of all of them, and they were the finest of their kind in the world. Try as he would to rationalize the figures, his mathematician's mind could allow no greater chance than 1 in 100,000,000—that is, virtually no chance at all—of his living through this year.

The realization that he was soon to die had depressed him, but soon his depression had turned to deep contentment. The so-called Mystery of Life held no fascination for him; he drew satisfaction from the predictability of life just as he drew his livelihood from the predictability of death. His ability to figure out what was going to happen had given him his profound sense of well-being.

For example, he had known the prospective type of mate that each of his friends would choose before there was any proposal, and he had even known when each proposal would be made. He had always known when his salary was to be increased and by how much. He had known what there would be for dinner and what he was going to get for his birthday. He had never once missed a train. So of course George Nesbitt would know when his end was imminent.

How right that the work of his lifetime should inform him of his death, should cross-check it and prove it for him a dozen times over! When death came it would bring to an end as complete and satisfying a life as anyone could have wished.

When his last birthday finally arrived he was actually looking forward to learning how the end would come. The company's chief doctor examined him on his birthday and pronounced him fit: heart, lungs, arteries, digestive system—everything in good order. His eyes were beginning to go, but it was unlikely that he would die of near-sightedness.

Almost certainly an accident would finally claim him. How many people slipped in the bathtub, stepped from between parked cars, stumbled on a dangerous pavement! He knew the statistics forward and backward. For years he had had to be careful to avoid a certain worn spot in his office rug, the result of his habit of swinging around in his chair and scuffing his feet absently on the floor. The rug could give him a bad spill, and the Maintenance Division had often asked to patch it. He wouldn't hear of it. Many years ago, when the rug was two years old, he had made

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some calculations about its life expectancy; these calculations would have been thrown off by repairs. He preferred to watch out for the danger spot and be careful of it.

As the year progressed he began observing himself. On crowded street corners, in plunging elevators, on hurtling trains, he would be seized by a moment of panic and think: *Is this it?* It was never even close to being it, and after some months he started searching around for other ways in which he might die. He even toyed briefly with the ludicrous possibility that one of his girl friends might kill him in a fit of jealousy.

He watched the months, then the weeks, then the days go by. Tomorrow was his birthday and this year of his life would be over. Nothing had happened. That 1-in-100,000,000 chance that pays no attention to actuaries was about to claim him. He wasn't going to die. After today every sun would be an affront to his life's work, every meal would be gall.

The idea of suicide had come to him this morning, when he had finally abandoned hope of any other end. It was repugnant to him, but it was a solution, and he had delayed it long enough. The contour farmers' table was as complete as it would ever be, and the President of the company had been asking for it. His secretary, Miss Robbins, would need most of tomorrow morning to prepare the requisite number of copies for inter-office distribution. Miss Robbins, sensing the respect Nesbitt had for numbers, was very slow and careful when copying them. He dropped the table in his out-basket and consulted his watch. 5:17. Time for one last entry in his horn chart. He took a notebook from a desk drawer, consulted his watch, and listened.

For years he had been keeping statistics on automobile-horn sounds. Every day for a thirty-second period between 5:15 and 5:20 he listened to horns, noted the number of separate sounds, and marked it in his notebook together with the date and weather. He knew how the blowing of horns was affected by heat, rain, darkness, and the approach of holidays. He liked to play with the figures the way some men play with motors.

He made his entry, closed the book, and replaced it in the drawer. (His will explained the horn chart.) He put his watch and fountain pen on the desk, swung his chair around and went to the window, carefully

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stepping over the worn spot in the rug. There would be no awkwardness in jumping out the enormous old-fashioned window that reached almost to the floor.

He flung the window open; the horns became louder and then the sheet of paper in his basket fluttered to the floor. He picked up the paper and put it on the desk, using his watch to weight it down. Suddenly he had a pang of fear: was suicide a proper way out for a man in his situation?

He picked up his phone. "Miss Robbins, the suicide file, please." He sat down tensely at the desk to wait. Usually while he waited for Miss Robbins there was something for him to do, but now everything was in order. He knew how long he would have to wait for the file. Miss Robbins wasn't one of those super-efficient secretaries, but she could be trusted to get her work done at a satisfactory, steady pace. She was no better or worse at her job than she had been two weeks after he hired her, three years ago, when she was 21. Miss Robbins had been exactly what he was looking for in a secretary. She wore conservative clothes, she lived with her mother in the suburbs, and it was unlikely that she would suddenly leave to get married. She had lived up to, but not beyond, his expectations.

He waited impatiently with his back to the door, looking out the vast window. He heard Miss Robbins open the door, and when she had taken the five steps necessary to reach his desk he said, "Thank you." He heard her deposit the file, but waited until she had taken the five steps back to the door and had closed it before he turned around and reached with trembling hands for his answer.

The file sustained his worst fears. Every chart he had ever compiled denied him the right to suicide. Given his health, his work, the season of the year and other factors, such an exit was distastefully improbable. He searched vainly for some category into which he could fit without defying the figures, but wherever he looked he found that death by suicide would be an insult to his life's work.

Nesbitt closed the file. His mind raged at this chance that had condemned him to numberless years of uncertainties. He felt lightheaded. He was a shaken man.

The door opened and Miss Robbins stuck her head in. "If you won't be needing me any more tonight, Mr. Nesbitt . . .?" she asked. She had asked the same rhetorical question at the end of every business day for

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three years. He had never needed her, and his answer had always been, "That's all for today, Miss Robbins. Good night."

Suddenly he resented the satisfaction she would get from hearing what she expected and going home to her mother in the suburbs to continue her routine life. He hated her simple knowledge of exactly what she would be doing tomorrow and the next day and the next. While he—a world authority on the theory of numbers—was living in doubt from breakfast to lunch and from lunch to dinner, she—who could barely center a page in her typewriter—would know her every action for years ahead, and the counteraction of everyone who touched her life.

She knew that her boss was kindly and honest, that her mother would have dinner ready for her the minute she got home, that she would go to the movies on Friday nights when the bill changed at her nearby theater, that she would spend her vacation at Timberlane Lodge from which she would send him his annual postcard.

He wanted to jar her out of complacency as he had been jarred out of his.

He heard himself say, "Would you step over here for just a moment, Miss Robbins?" and he watched her walk across to him with that odd walk he had noticed lately.

"I don't have my pad, Mr. Nesbitt," she said in a bewildered voice, and turned to leave the room.

"Never mind your pad, Miss Robbins," he said. "I just want to talk to you."

By the time she reached his desk he had found a device to upset her well-ordered life. He looked past her thin body and said, "Miss Robbins—Kathy—we've been working together for three years, but it's only recently that I've become aware of you as a person. I think the real Kathy Robbins—a very warm, attractive, understanding girl—has finally got through to me, and I must confess I'm very much attracted to her."

He drew a breath and went on, "I wonder if you and I, just the two of us, mightn't go away somewhere this weekend . . .?"

She said nothing and the expression on her face didn't change. He said, "I don't mean to go away on business. I mean some place like Las Vegas. For relaxation."

She turned quickly and hurried from the room, with that same awkward walk. Nesbitt felt sick. He had accomplished his purpose, but of what use had it been? It was

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the most senseless thing he had ever done in his life.

He sighed and looked at his watch. 5:35. Past quitting time. He didn't like to stay past quitting time. It was an admission he hadn't properly organized his working day.

He put his watch in his vest pocket and clipped his pen to his inside jacket pocket and took a last look at his desk. Everything was in order, and he would be back in the morning. There would be the problem of replacing Miss Robbins if she resigned despite his apology. Well, a new life, a new secretary. All the old strings had run out.

The door opened and Miss Robbins walked in. Was this the resignation so soon?

"Mr. Nesbitt," she stammered, "ever since your wife died I'd hoped—I never thought you'd—but now—"

"Calm down, Miss Robbins," he said gently.

"You've given me such short notice and everything," she continued in a low voice. "Do you think I could take a long lunch hour tomorrow to buy a couple of dresses for evenings?"

"For what evenings, Miss Robbins?"

"For—you know—Las Vegas."

"You mean you'll go?" he asked, shocked.

"I think it would be very mature of us to get to know each other better in an informal atmosphere away from the office," she said. "Of course, I couldn't let my mother know anything about it—she'd die! But I could tell her that I'm spending the weekend at my girl friend's house."

He stepped back quickly in surprise and the torn spot in the rug caught his heel. He was flipped out the window as if he was doing a back dive. He suddenly realized why she walked in that funny way. She was wearing an extremely tight skirt. He thought briefly about the state's slow progress in cutting the heavy toll of Industrial Accidents, which was five times as serious as Drowning, and then he took a last pleasure in observing the accuracy of his actuarial calculations.

"O"

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a *NEW* Mr. Strang story by

WILLIAM BRITTAIN

In which Mr. Leonard Strang, the gnomelike little science teacher, proves that he is indeed the Sherlock Holmes of Aldershot High School. Why, sometimes he even sounds like The Master! Note, for example, Mr. Strang's cryptic remarks in the last three paragraphs on page 75 . . .

MR. STRANG CHECKS A RECORD

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

There ought to be a law forbidding rain on Saturdays, thought Mr. Strang.

As the diminutive and gnomelike little science teacher pulled his battered purple coupe out of Napoleon Drive and onto Wellington Avenue, the rain beat against the windshield in sheets that made the flicking wipers almost useless. Even at ten o'clock in the morning, visibility was so bad that Mr. Strang turned on his headlights. Wiping moisture from the inside of the glass he peered up the street.

Suddenly a figure in a black slicker loomed in front of him. A policeman. At the man's gesture Mr. Strang pulled to the curb, switched off the ignition, and rolled down a window. Drops of rain dribbled off the roof of the car and into Mr. Strang's lit pipe.

"Yes, officer?" he said as the policeman approached. "Was I doing something wrong?"

"No, sir. But we've had an emergency in the white house over there. The street's pretty well blocked. You'll have to turn around."

Up ahead Mr. Strang could see the revolving red lights of two Aldershot police cars and what appeared to be/ an ambulance. He nodded to the officer and pressed the starter.

Nothing. No whir of starter or roar of engine. With an obstinacy that seemed almost human, the ancient automobile had selected another in its long list of inopportune times to break down. "Endoprocta!" growled Mr. Strang.

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"Probably the ignition got wet," said the policeman. "I'll call for a tow truck when I get the chance. Don't know how long that'll be, though."

"What is it, Gibbs?" came a voice out of the rain. Then a man appeared behind the policeman, water gushing from the brim of his felt hat. "Oh, hello, Mr. Strang. Having car trouble?"

"Paul Roberts." Mr. Strang peered upward at the bulky and exceedingly damp form of the detective sergeant. "What's the trouble over there?"

"Well, I—" Roberts looked longingly at the dry interior of the car. "Do you mind if I come in out of the rain?" he asked.

Without waiting for an answer Roberts walked around the car and climbed in on the passenger side. "What a day," he breathed, shaking the water from his limp hat. "Until the doctor and the lab boys get through inside the house there's nothing for me to do but wait. And I might as well be dry while I'm doing it."

"If you're going to get water all over the inside of my car," said Mr. Strang with a grin, "you've got to pay for the privilege. So tell me, what's going on?"

"It's the Bulland house," replied Roberts. "Somebody seems to have broken in. Mr. Bulland and his son were attacked. The boy got beat up pretty bad, and his father—" Roberts paused. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this, Mr. Strang," he mused. "It's supposed to be confidential information."

"How confidential can it be with all those people standing around the house?" asked the teacher. "But I promise I won't breathe a word. Come on, Paul, give."

Roberts shook his head quizzically. "Maybe this is just oddball enough to interest you," he said. "Like I said, somebody broke in, probably trying a burglary. Their car was at the repair shop, and whoever it was probably figured the place was empty. So he decided he'd just walk in and grab a few things."

"Bulland?" Mr. Strang frowned. "There's a Joey Bulland at Aldershot High School. Is that the boy you mean?"

Roberts flipped open his notebook and glanced at the scrawled writing. "Yeah," he said. "A freshman. Anyway, once the burglar was inside, he must have run into Bulland and his son in the basement. Joey had his face pretty well bashed—two black eyes, several bruises, and some teeth loosen-

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ed. But Bulland himself—Mr. Strang, I feel like an idiot even putting it in my report. It sounds like something out of an oldtime horror movie."

"Oh?" The teacher's grizzled eyebrows shot upward. "What was it, Paul?"

"He had two small punctures." The detective indicated a spot about three inches below his left ear. "Right here, Mr. Strang. On his neck."

Mr. Strang considered Roberts curiously for several moments. Having worked with the stolid detective unofficially on other occasions, he knew that Roberts was not blessed with a vivid imagination. The punctures were undoubtedly real. Still—

"Vampire?" Mr. Strang's mouth curved into a sly grin. "The walking dead? Bela Lugosi flitting about in a Dracula suit—"

"Cut it out, Mr. Strang," Roberts interrupted. "I didn't say anything about a vampire. Look, I've talked too much already. I'll have Gibbs give you a hand with your car so you can get out of here. The lab boys'll be about finished, so I've got to get back in there."

"Paul?" The wizened teacher knocked out the dead ashes from his pipe. "Let me come with you."

"Look, Mr. Strang, nobody's allowed in the Bulland house except authorized persons."

"Who authorizes them?"

"Well, I do, but—"

"Then come on." Mr. Strang opened the door and got out, standing in the drenching rain. "As an avid viewer of monster films I'll be your guest expert on vampires."

With a resigned shrug Roberts led the way to the rear door of the Bulland house. The area in front of the steps had been transformed by the rain into a soupy mess, and as he walked through it Mr. Strang could feel mud piling on the tops of his shoes. "The intruder had to come in this way," said Roberts. "The front door was locked from the inside."

The rear door of the house led into the kitchen, where dozens of muddy tracks on the linoleum had produced a surrealistic design that might have been called Housewife's Nightmare. "You guys keep everybody out of the rest of the house," said Roberts, indicating two uniformed men. "So far we've been able to keep those white rugs in the living room and the dining room from getting tracks on them. Let's keep it that way."

A flashbulb popped in a narrow doorway leading from the kitchen. "That's the entrance to the basement, Mr.

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Strang. The intern from the ambulance is down there now, patching up Joey and his father, and trying to calm down Mrs. Bulland. You all finished, Stacey?"

The cameraman nodded and began buttoning his raincoat. Mr. Strang followed Roberts down the basement stairs. At the bottom a group of men were gathered around a small figure lying on the cement floor, covered with blankets. Off to one side a young man in a white uniform was attending to a heavily muscled man who was gingerly rubbing his neck. Beside him stood a slender middle-aged woman, her eyes red from weeping.

"That's Joey in the blankets," said Roberts. "The medic's already given him something for the pain, so he'll probably be pretty groggy. I guess his old man needed looking after too."

Joey Bulland had indeed received a severe beating about the head. One eye was swollen almost shut, and the other wasn't in much better condition. There were greenish-yellow bruises on one side of his face, and his nose was still bleeding slightly.

"Mr. Strang," mumbled the boy. "I know you. I seen you in school lots of times. What are you doing here?"

"In school?" Alexander Bulland's voice was deep and harsh. "What's school got to do with this, Roberts?"

"Take it easy, Mr. Bulland." The intern thumped a hypodermic needle into Bulland's arm. "Tetanus shot," he explained. "For those two punctures in your neck."

Mr. Strang bent forward and examined the small wounds. They were almost two inches apart, and each had an angry red area circling it.

"They're fairly deep," said the intern. "It's lucky they missed both the carotid artery and the jugular vein. He'll have a stiff neck for a few days, but that's all."

"Have you figured out what caused 'em yet, Doc?" asked Roberts.

"That's your job," was the answer. "I just fix 'em up. I don't explain 'em."

"Lemme alone now," said Bulland, roughly pushing the intern away. "You've done enough. I've got a right to my family doctor, haven't I?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then the only thing left for you to do is get hold of Dr. Kermit. I want him to look at us, not some kid who's not dry behind the ears yet."

"Easy, Mr. Bulland," said Roberts. "I'll call Dr. Kermit if you like. But Joey will have to

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be taken to the hospital in the ambulance."

Mrs. Bulland looked up, startled. She turned her pale face toward her husband, bringing one hand slowly to her lips. "Oh, Alex," she breathed. "The hospital. What are we going to do? How can we—"

"Joey'll be all right," Bulland interrupted, his loud voice drowning out his wife's whisper. "I want you to go along with him to see that everything's taken care of. And keep a close watch on him, hear? I don't want nobody interruptin' him while he's sleepin'."

As the intern left to get a stretcher, Roberts took out his notebook. "Feel up to telling us what happened?" he asked.

"Not much to tell," said Bulland. "Whoever it was must have got down here awful quiet. We never heard him. He was on us before we knew what was happenin'. It—I don't remember much about it."

"And you, Mrs. Bulland. Did you see anything?"

The woman's wide eyes darted in confusion from her husband to Roberts and back again. To the teacher she seemed on the edge of a nervous collapse. "I—no, I was upstairs. I didn't see any—anything. I couldn't possibly tell you—" She burst into tears and buried her head in her hands.

"Dammit, leave her alone," barked Bulland. "Can't you see she's had about enough for one day?"

"Yes, sir," said Roberts. "Can you give us any kind of a description, Mr. Bulland? Anything at all?"

"I didn't see him real good. He hit me on the back of the head. I still got the lump there. Then he must have come after Joey. Afterwards, when I come to, I told Joey to go upstairs and call the police. I guess whoever it was must be long gone by now."

"Yeah." Roberts sighed as he closed his notebook. "Well, maybe Joey will be able to tell us something later. I'll check with him at the hospital tomorrow."

"Like hell you will," said Bulland grimly. "First you bug my wife, and now it's my kid. Leave him alone, hear?"

"I'll have to talk with him. It's my job."

"And he's my boy. So I want to be there when you start with the questions."

"Like you say, Mr. Bulland," said Roberts. He looked up at two men who were standing at the far side of the basement next to what appeared to be an undersized automobile body. Near it, in a crate made of narrow wooden slats, there was a variety of hand tools.

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"What about prints?" asked Roberts.

"We've been trying," said one of the men, "but everybody in the world must have been down here at one time or another. It'll take weeks to check them all out."

"The boys like to come down and help Joey work on his car," said Bulland. "He's going to put a small motor in it when he's done with the body work. Joey can hardly wait to get his hands on the family car, but this'll have to do till he's old enough. Anyway, he was nailin' the body stringers on when—when— Say, how much longer are you gonna take, Mr. Roberts?"

"We're almost finished," replied the detective. As he spoke, the intern and an assistant came down the stairs with a stretcher. "You and your wife can ride to the hospital with Joey in the ambulance if you like," said Roberts. "I'll leave a man on duty here and meet you at the hospital. Maybe you'll remember something on the way."

"Maybe I'll remember something," said Bulland. "But I doubt it. It all happened pretty sudden."

Mr. Strang and Roberts went up the stairs, through the kitchen, and out the back door. The rain had slackened.

"You'd better go home," said Roberts to the teacher, "and get on some dry clothes. Anyway, you got to see what police work is usually like. Just another breaking-and-entering. With the attack on Mr. Bulland and Joey, we can probably add a charge of felonious assault if we ever find the guy, which I doubt. I wish I could explain those two marks on Bulland's neck, though. Aside from that, it's fairly routine."

Mr. Strang rammed tobacco into his pipe and peered over his glasses. "To me," he said softly, "those two marks are the only routine things about this whole business. It's the other things that are rather weird."

"The other things? What do you mean, Mr. Strang?"

The teacher shook his head. "Not now, Paul. I've got some checking of my own to do first." He touched a match to his pipe and blew a cloud of acrid smoke into the damp air. "I might suggest, though, that you give serious consideration to the condition of the living-room rug."

"The rug? Why, the burglar never touched the rug. It's in perfect shape."

"Precisely," snapped Mr. Strang. And before the detective could reply, he walked stiffly to his car and got in. By

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some miracle the engine caught and he drove off in a cloud of blue haze.

The following Monday morning found Mr. Strang in the guidance office of Aldershot High School. Virginia Cannoughby, the youngest of the counselors, was in her office, and Mr. Strang walked in without knocking.

"Good morning, Mr. Strang," she said, looking up from her work and honoring the teacher with a devastating smile. "What can I do for you? Is one of your students giving you a hard time?"

"No, Ginnie," replied Mr. Strang. "It's not one of my students I'm concerned with today. It's a boy named Joey Bulland."

"Yes, I recognize the name. Ninth grader. A little bit of a boy—seems scared of his own shadow. But didn't I hear that on Saturday—"

Mr. Strang nodded. "That's the one," he said.

"I don't know him very well," said Miss Cannoughby. "But all his records are in the files. What'll it be? Grades? Achievement tests? Conduct?"

"Attendance," replied Mr. Strang. "Do you have a record of his attendance?"

"Well, for this year, the main office would have—"

"Not just this year. I want a record of his attendance from the time he entered school. And the reasons for his absences, if possible."

"Mr. Strang," sighed Miss Cannoughby, "I'd have to check back to his grade school for all that information. It'd be sort of—well, complicated."

"Ginnie," said Mr. Strang softly, "indulge an old man who's weak and feeble and desperately in need of your help. Get me the attendance records."

Virginia Cannoughby's eyes twinkled. "You old fraud," she smiled. "You're about as weak and feeble as a strip of rawhide. All right, I'll get the records for you. Meet me for lunch."

"A pleasure," replied the teacher with a courtly bow.

During the sixth period Mr. Strang and Virginia Cannoughby sat in a corner of the teachers' dining room. "Here are Joey's attendance records," said the counselor, passing them across the table.

Mr. Strang broke off his consideration of a gelatinous mass of rice and gravy. Taking the records he leafed through them. When he had finished he pushed his black-rimmed glasses onto his forehead and rubbed his chin.

"Curious," he said.

"What's curious, Mr. Strang?"

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"This pattern of absences. Every year Joey's had three or four absences from five to eight days. And always for the same reason—sickness."

"What's so odd about that?"

"First, the absences are all evenly spaced—always about ten weeks apart. And second, there are almost no absences of one or two days. Usually five or more."

"All right, it's curious. But I still don't see—"

"Doesn't it seem a little strange that Joey would have three or four serious illnesses every year?" asked the teacher.

"Perhaps. But his marks are fairly good. So he's been able to keep up with his work."

"Yes, but it's not his work that's worrying me. Excuse me, Ginnie. I've got a call to make."

"To Joey's parents?"

"No. To a Dr. Kermit."

Dr. Leland Kermit was unable to see Mr. Strang until after eight o'clock that evening. Finally, however, the last patient left and Dr. Kermit waved Mr. Strang into his office.

"Your call was kind of unusual," said the doctor, leaning back in his swivel chair. "I'm not in the habit of talking about my patients with outsiders. There is a question of medical ethics, you know."

"The question of ethics may well come up during the course of this conversation," replied Mr. Strang. "I hope you'll remain true to the Hippocratic oath. But we're both in the business of helping others. You do it by healing the body, while I try to educate the mind. So don't dismiss me until you've heard what I have to say."

"Well spoken, Mr. Strang. But before we go any further, just who is it we're discussing?"

"Joey Bulland. You know him, don't you?"

"Joey? Of course. What about him?"

"Every school year Joey's been absent several times with fairly long illnesses. All we've got on the record is that he was sick. I'd like to know what was wrong with him."

Dr. Kermit smiled slightly. "Don't worry about what happened to him on Saturday," he said. "Joey'll be as right as rain in a week or so. There isn't a healthier boy in Aldershot. I guess that's the trouble—he's got too much energy."

"But these absence records show—"

"Not sickness, Mr. Strang—accidents. Joey's small and kind of clumsy, and things happen to him. That's all. He falls downstairs or a chair he's standing on collapses under him—things like that. The trouble with your records is

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that any time a student is laid up in bed for a few days, the school says he's sick."

"True," said the teacher. "We don't differentiate between disease and injury. Can you tell me about his last accident? The one about three months ago?"

"He was climbing a tree and fell. Cut his face up pretty bad. I treated him here at the office and kept him in bed for a week until the cuts were healed."

"You'd think his parents would look after him a little better."

Dr. Kermit shook his head. "You're a bachelor, aren't you, Mr. Strang? But still, as a teacher, you ought to know that a teen-age boy's got more energy than a stick of dynamite. Besides, you can't wrap kids in cotton all their lives. They've got to get out and let off steam, and if the price of their doing it is a few cuts and bruises, at least the kid's learned enough to be careful the next time he climbs a tree. See what I mean?"

"But if Joey's absences are all because of accidents it would seem to me that his mother and father could somehow—"

The doctor waved a hand impatiently. "Listen, Mr. Strang," he said. "I've known Alex and Carol Bulland since I started practicing in this town, and there aren't two more devoted parents anywhere. You ought to see the way some kids are brought into this office. Torn sloppy clothes, dirty faces, uncombed hair. Not Joey. Whenever his mother or father brings him here, it's been in clean clothes, with his shoes shined and his hair combed. He looks the way a boy ought to look, not like some little tramp. No, I've got nothing but admiration for the way Carol and Alex are bringing up their boy."

Mr. Strang nodded. "Maybe you're right," he said. "I've seen Joey fall over his own feet in school. But he seems well-mannered enough. Tell me, what happened to him the time before he fell out of the tree?"

"Mr. Bulland told me Joey tripped and hit his head on the edge of a table. There was a big cut in his scalp. I had to take stitches. But I never saw a kid with more guts—no yelling or crying or anything."

"I see," said Mr. Strang. "Dr. Kermit, I've taken enough of your time. I'll be leaving now. But there is one thing I'd like you to do for me." The teacher took a small notebook from a jacket pocket and scribbled three words on one of the pages. He tore the page out and handed it to Kermit.

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"I'd like you to look up this subject in your medical journals. Tonight, if possible, or first thing in the morning. Perhaps you've already done some thinking about it. Get all the information you can. Then, if you would, I'd appreciate your calling me at school. Goodbye, Dr. Kermit."

The following evening there was a knock on the door of the Bulland house. When Alexander Bulland answered, he saw Paul Roberts standing in the doorway.

"C'mon in," said Bulland. "Carol and I was just gettin' ready to watch some TV. Hey, good news! Joey's coming home from the hospital tomorrow." He turned and shouted toward the living room. "Carol, it's Mr. Roberts, the detective. I think he's got some information on who slugged—"

Mr. Strang and Dr. Kermit walked into the front hallway and stood behind Roberts.

"I didn't see you two out there in the dark," said Bulland. "But come on in. The more the merrier."

"Mr. Bulland," said Roberts as they walked into the living room, "I know this is kind of unusual, the three of us coming to see you this way."

"Yeah," said Bulland, "I was wondering about that." As they entered, Carol Bulland switched off the TV and gestured them to seats on the couch.

"Mr. and Mrs. Bulland," Roberts began, "this is Mr. Leonard Strang. He's got an idea about what happened to Joey." Bulland rubbed the bandage on his neck as the detective continued, "It took most of the day for him to convince me that I even ought to trouble you with it. What I mean to say is, we're all here strictly unofficially, and if you'd rather we left, why just say so."

"Well," Bulland began, "it's kind of late, and maybe in the morning we could—"

"No, sit down," interrupted Carol Bulland, her face pale. "I'd like to hear what these men have to say, Alex."

Bulland leaned close to Roberts and whispered confidentially, "Who's the short guy again?"

"Mr. Strang. He's a teacher at the high school."

"I didn't figure him for a cop. Think he'd like a beer? It's private here, and I wouldn't tell anybody, if you get what I mean."

Roberts shook his head. "I'd just like you to hear what Mr. Strang has to say, if you don't mind."

"Why not?" Bulland eased himself back into his chair.

"Mr. Bulland," the teacher

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began, "perhaps in the confusion you don't remember, but I was here on Saturday morning with Detective Roberts."

"That's all right. I don't mind. If Roberts wanted you here, what difference could it make to me?"

"Thank you. In any case, I saw something on Saturday which I considered rather unusual. I'm sure Mr. Roberts overlooked it only because he was much more interested in those strange punctures in your neck."

"What was it you noticed, Mr. Strang?" asked Carol Bulland, leaning forward in her chair, her lips pressed tight.

"The white rugs in the living room and dining room."

"They are rather old. We've been hoping to replace them when we get some extra money."

"If you'll recall," the teacher went on, "the kitchen was a regular quagmire from all the mud that had been tracked in. And yet there wasn't a mark on those white rugs."

"So?" shrugged Bulland.

"Mr. Bulland, let's consider the type of man we're talking about—a sneak thief. He runs into a supposedly empty house to steal a few items and then tries to get back out as quickly as possible, without being noticed. And yet our man didn't follow that pattern at all. He must have come in through the back door, muddying his feet in the process. But judging from the lack of mud tracks on those white rugs he didn't once go into the living room or dining room or head for the stairs to the second floor, where he might logically expect to find some things worth stealing. Instead he either remained in the kitchen for a while or headed directly for the basement. It just doesn't make sense."

Bulland pondered this point. "Yeah, I guess so," he said finally. "Only maybe he didn't make tracks because he wore boots or somethin' over his shoes. Or what if when he came in he heard Joey and me talkin' in the basement?"

Mr. Strang shook his head. "I doubt that a man who feared discovery at any moment would stop to remove boots and then put them on again when he left. And if he heard voices wouldn't he be more likely to move away from them instead of toward them?"

"What are you gettin' at, Mr. Strang?" asked Bulland.

The teacher ignored the question, glancing at Carol Bulland who was staring at him fearfully. "Another thing," he continued. "When you regained consciousness, Mr. Bulland, you

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had a bump on your head and two wounds in your neck. Joey, on the other hand, had just received a severe beating. He was obviously suffering acutely from pain and shock. And yet, according to what you told the police, you sent him upstairs to phone for help instead of going yourself. Rather strange behavior on your part, wouldn't you say?"

"My throat—I couldn't talk."

"You could talk well enough to have told—that's your own word—'told' Joey to call the police," replied the teacher. "It won't do, Mr. Bulland, it really won't. You and I both know there wasn't any burglar in this house last Saturday."

"Listen, Mister Teacher, I got a kid in the hospital with his face beaten up. I took a sock on the head and these cuts on my neck myself. Are you tryin' to tell me I'm imaginin' that too?"

"No, Mr. Bulland." Mr. Strang shook his head calmly. "But once the idea of an intruder is eliminated, only one possible cause for Joey's injuries remains."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"You, Mr. Bulland. You were the one who beat up Joey."

For a moment Bulland stared at the teacher, his face void of any expression. And then he started to laugh.

"Oh, boy, that's a good one!" he roared between gasps of laughter. "This shriveled twirp is accusing me of sluggin' my own kid. What do you think of that, Mr. Roberts?"

"An accusation has been made against you, Mr. Bulland," said Roberts in a flat voice. "You have the right to remain silent, but if you do speak, anything you say—"

"Hey, wait a minute. Wait just a minute." Bulland waved Roberts into silence. "You jokers are serious, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir," said Roberts. "Would you like to call your—"

"I don't want to call nobody. Yeah, I heard all about that rights stuff on TV. But don't any of you try to con me. You got no case. How do you explain these?" He tore the bandage from his throat, revealing the two puncture wounds.

"I'd like to show you something," said Mr. Strang. "Mrs. Bulland, I wonder if you'd mind going down into the basement and bringing up that slatted crate Joey was using for a tool chest. Not the tools, just the crate."

"Hold it," said Bulland. "You got no right to—"

"I'll get the crate, Mr. Strang," said Carol Bulland, her

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voice shaking. She returned shortly and handed the crate to Roberts.

The detective pulled at the slats, one by one. Finally he came to a slat which easily pulled away from the crate. At each end of the strip of wood two nails gleamed wickedly.

"There seems to be blood around these two nail holes," said Roberts. "The lab should be able to tell us if it is or not."

"It will be," said Mr. Strang. "Come, Mr. Bulland, there's only one possible explanation in the light of what we've just seen. Joey was in the basement. Whether he was working there or was hiding from you really makes no difference. In any case, you found him there and started to beat him. Either he had the slat loose or he pulled it loose during the struggle. To protect himself he struck at you with it, hitting you in the neck. Perhaps you stumbled into something or maybe Joey also hit you on the head. You were probably unconscious for at least a few seconds. That's when Joey broke away, ran upstairs, and made the call to the police—to get protection from you, Mr. Bulland."

"But I tell you, the burglar was—"

"According to the call sheet," Roberts interrupted, "whoever phoned didn't mention a burglar. He just said police were needed at this address. Then, right in the middle of a sentence, the line went dead."

"You followed Joey upstairs, didn't you, Mr. Bulland?" said the teacher. "You broke the phone connection. But when you realized the police were on their way you made up the story about the burglar and threatened Joey to make him go along with it. Then you took the boy back into the basement, replaced the slat in the crate, and waited for the police to arrive."

"You characters hand me a laugh," said Bulland, his voice belligerent. "Of all the wild yarns I ever heard this takes the cake. Just tell me one thing. Why? Why would I want to beat up my own kid?"

Mr. Strang turned to Kermit. "Doctor?" he said softly.

"Alex," said Dr. Kermit, "I can't keep quiet any longer. You're not the only one it's ever happened to, you know. There are thousands of cases, all over the country."

"Cases? What cases?"

"One name for it—the three words Mr. Strang wrote out yesterday—is 'battered child syndrome.' Usually it occurs with younger children, but not always. For some reason a parent becomes unreasonably angry

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over real or imagined misbehavior by the child. He might be crying or refusing to obey—almost anything. The parent reacts violently and with a complete lack of concern for the child's safety. Children have been beaten, burned, scalded—and invariably when the parents come to their senses and seek a doctor's help they call it an 'accident.' Usually the doctor refuses to report suspected cases of battered child syndrome to the police because they're so hard to prove. But I can't go on with this, Alex. I can't stand by and see Joey hurt any more."

"I—I don't believe this is happening. What proof—"

"It's all there, Alex. I've suspected it for quite a while, and Mr. Strang was able to gather the facts I didn't have. The periodic long absences from school to allow the bruises to heal. The 'emergency calls' after a child has been carefully prepared to see the doctor and dressed in his best clothes. The refusal to allow an examination by a strange physician. Medical reports are full of such cases. But if it hadn't been for Mr. Strang here, I might never have had the nerve to stop you. It isn't easy, knowing that one mistake about a thing like this could cost me my license to practice medicine. But I know now I'm not mistaken about what's been happening to Joey."

"Mistake? I'll show you a mistake." Bulland jerked his thumb in the direction of the front door. "Get out of here, all three of you! This is my house, and I don't want you in it any more. And if you say one word about what's been said here tonight, I'll sue all three of you for every cent you've got in the world. The idea that I'd beat up on my own boy and—"

"Alex! Stop it!" Carol Bulland's shrill screaming rang out in the small room. "They know! Somebody besides me finally knows what you've been doing to Joey all these years. Oh, God, at last somebody else knows!" Her body convulsed, she threw herself into Roberts' arms.

"I—I tried to stop him at first," she said, burying her face in the detective's overcoat. "But whenever I tried to protect Joey, Alex would beat him all the harder. I couldn't turn him in to the police—not the father of my child. So I kept quiet, just praying that someone else would find out about it. And now you've come. Thank heaven you've come."

"Why did he do it, Mrs. Bulland?" asked the detective gently.

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"It was always little things. Once it was because he cried when he got into a fight with another boy. 'Tough guys don't cry,' Alex told him. Then he hit Joey—with a cane. Another time Joey spilled some things out of his fishing-tackle box. Or he used tools and didn't put them back. Always little things. And then Alex would hit him, beat him unmercifully. It was always so senseless."

"Senseless, huh?" Bulland stood at the far side of the room, his fists clenched, like an animal at bay. "Lemme tell you guys somethin'. Last Saturday you noticed that the car was gone, right? Well, that was a new car—brand-new. The first new car I ever owned in my whole life. I'd been savin' for six years to get a new car. Six years of no beers at the tavern on payday and stayin' away from poker parties and wearin' Sunday clothes that was thin enough to see through. Finally I got it. Just last week. All bright and shiny, with the engine turning over like a cat purrin'. After the old clunker I had, it looked like the most beautiful thing in the world.

"So I put it in the garage. And Joey had strict orders not to go in there. Strict orders, you got that?

"Early Saturday morning I heard a loud sound in the garage. I jumped out of bed and ran down. It was Joey. He'd been foolin' around inside the car—got it started somehow. It had jerked forward, and the whole front end was bashed in against the rear of the garage. I didn't have the car four days, and it was ruined. When the repairman towed it off to the shop he said it'd cost at least two hundred to fix it. Two hundred bucks. Where was I gonna get that kind of dough after just buyin' a new car?"

Bulland's voice was getting louder and more incoherent.

"Told him to stay out of the garage!" he shouted. "Had to teach him a lesson some way. What else could I do? Answer me that! What else could I do?"

He was still shouting when Roberts lifted the telephone receiver and began to dial.

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This is the 363rd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a story of heart and conscience, with two wonderful last words (now, don't peek!) . . .

The author, V. L. Gallahue, is a native Virginian. She was born in Alexandria and attended Virginia Intermont College at Bristol; later she took courses at George Washington University and other schools in the Washington, D.C. area.

She has been a legal secretary for the Department of Justice and for a private law firm in Honolulu, Hawaii. Her husband, the late Dr. Edward Gallahue, was an agricultural economist and marketing specialist. Between homemaking and raising two sons and occasional stints of substitute teaching and indexing college textbooks, Mrs. Gallahue has studied creative writing; presently she is attending classes conducted by James O'Connor Sargent to whom we are most grateful for calling Mrs. Gallahue's work to our attention and for sending us the text of her "first story."

The author closed her letter to us by saying: "I score high at golf, low at bridge, and enjoy both immensely." We'll bet she also enjoys writing immensely . . .

REST IN PEACE

by V. L. GALLAHUE

"She was a bitch, if you'll excuse the language, sir."

Inspector Burke had excused far stronger language, but he had hardly expected this from the starched, middle-aged woman wearing the blue uniform of a housemaid. He suspected that a good deal of kindness lurked beneath the ample flesh that now quivered with indignation.

It had been less than an hour since the Inspector had received the report from the police laboratory: Mrs. Althea Hammond, proprietor of the Hammond Rest Home, had died the day before of an overdose of

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barbiturates. Although early findings pointed to suicide, regulations required that the Inspector make a further investigation.

"Yes, ma'am. Why do you say that?"

"I'll tell you why, sir. That old biddy ran this place like it was a zoo. Like animals she treated these poor old folks. All four of 'em—and that sweet old Mr. Alden too—were chipper as you please when they first came here."

"When was that?"

"Six months ago, when the home opened. Now look at them. As soon as their families were out of sight she doped them up so they didn't know day from night. And nobody to check up on her. You know she didn't have to have a license."

"I know. Our city ordinance applies only to rest homes with six or more residents. But don't they have any relatives to keep track?"

"Oh, they have relatives, all right. But they're all out of the country except Miss Copeland's nephew—he's on the West Coast. *Leave your beloved oldsters with me, where they'll get Tender Loving Care while you're on that overseas assignment*—that's what her ad in the Yellow Pages says—and *Ambulatory Patients Only*—humph, they didn't stay ambulatory long. It's all they can do to creep out to the lounge on Thursday mornings while I clean their rooms."

"Let's back up a little. Did you say something about a fifth patient, a Mr. Alden, was it?"

"Yes, sir. He's the one that died. Pneumonia, they said."

"I see. Do you stay here all the time, Miss Adams?"

"No, sir. That is, I didn't until last night, after she—well, I couldn't leave them by themselves, and I can stay till their folks get here and make other arrangements. I've got my own apartment over on Barrett Road. Always went there right after I put the supper dishes in the dishwasher."

"Who looked after the patients at night, after you'd left?"

"She claimed she did. But I came back here one night—I'd forgotten my reading glasses—and she'd locked them all in their rooms and gone upstairs to her apartment. I tell you, Inspector, I'd have reported her for that if I hadn't needed my job so bad."

"Where did Mrs. Hammond keep their medication?"

"Medication?"

"Yes, you said she kept the patients 'doped up.' Where did she keep the sedatives?"

"Oh, in the medicine cabinet in her bathroom."

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"Let's take a look."

As he followed Miss Adams along the upstairs hall and through the master bedroom with its fourposter bed, matching mahogany dressers, and Oriental rug, it occurred to the Inspector that families paid well to have their "beloved oldsters" cared for.

Miss Adams drew a key from her pocket and unlocked the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. In answer to his raised eyebrow she explained that she had found the key in the drawer of Mrs. Hammond's bedside table.

The Inspector took a half-filled bottle of capsules from the middle shelf.

"And what is the schedule for these, Miss Adams?" he asked, looking at the label which read: *Use as needed.*

"I was to put one capsule on every tray at mealtimes, and Mrs. Hammond gave each of 'em two with milk at bedtime."

The Inspector looked back at the label.

"Who is this Dr. Morris?"

"He's got an office down the street. He's the one Mrs. Hammond called in if any of the patients got sick. A cold fish, sir, if you ask me."

He pocketed the capsules and led the way downstairs.

"Now, Miss Adams, I think I'd better talk with the patients in their rooms. They'll be more comfortable that way."

"Yes, sir. I'll show you to Mr. Dillard's room."

Inspector Burke followed the maid into the first room off the corridor where a white-haired ancient sat hunched forward in a straight-backed chair, his chin resting on his chest. The Inspector succeeded in getting little more than grunts in response to his questions—until he asked about the photograph on the dresser.

"Oh, yes, Michael—he's my son—good boy, Michael."

"I'm sure he is. I see he's in uniform. Colonel, eh?"

"Yep—in Germany now—good about writing, though—and about subscribing to the newspapers for me—got two big boys of his own."

The Inspector had been glancing round the room while the old man talked: good furniture, but no comfortable chair. On the small table near the unmade bed lay a copy of *The Wall Street Journal*, opened to the financial pages. Penciled notes in the margins listed current stock quotations.

"By the way, Mr. Dillard. I believe there was another patient, a Mr. Alden—"

"Alden—yes—too bad, too bad—he shouldn't have died." A hollow cackle burst from him. "Ought to call this the

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Rest-in-Peace Home—"

"What's that, Mr. Dillard?" the Inspector asked sharply.

But there was no answer. The old man had slumped farther into his chair and now seemed sound asleep.

In the next room Burke found a little doll of a woman. The bed was made, complete with pink satin throw pillows and a handmade afghan, also pink. Miss Alice Copeland rocked gently in a Boston rocker, a fixed smile on her face and her blue eyes staring straight ahead. Her cotton wrapper was smooth and fresh, her white hair was combed into a pile of curls, and her nails were a shining blush pink.

"Miss Copeland. I'm Inspector Burke of the Police Department. How are you today?"

"All right, all right, I guess. What was the name again, please?"

"Inspector Burke. Sorry to bother you, ma'am. How do you like it here?"

"All right, all right. Johnny's trying to take good care of me. My sister's boy, you know, just like my own. What was it you asked me?"

"How are you treated here, Miss Copeland?"

"All right, I tell you. I don't want Johnny worrying about me."

The Inspector fingered the flowered box of stationery on the desk and noted the fat pink envelope propped against the lamp. It was addressed in a dainty and surprisingly firm hand to *Mr. John Adcock, 1241 Harrison Street, Portland, Oregon.*

"Now, about Mr. Alden—"

"Mr. Alden, oh, yes, such a fine man. A waste, a waste. What did you say your name was?" She smiled vaguely, closed her eyes, and he knew the interview had ended.

Mrs. Hickerson, a stout asthmatic Buddha propped among her pillows, was next. The Inspector pushed aside a housecoat, a slip, and various unidentifiable garments to make room for himself on the only chair. His hostess watched him from under half-closed lids as he made a quick inspection of the room. Once the introductions were over, Burke spotted a half-finished brown and yellow argyle sock protruding from a knitting bag under the bed. This provided him with an opening.

"I suppose it's pretty dull around here. What do you find to do?"

The heavy lids lifted slightly. "Nothing, really . . . we don't feel like doing much, you know . . . and my asthma . . ."

"Yes, of course. I thought

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perhaps you did some handwork to pass the time?"

"Not any more. . . . I used to knit some . . . Now I don't have the energy . . . and my eyesight's failing."

"I see. By the way, I understand there used to be a Mr. Alden here. How well did you know him?"

"We all knew him well enough . . . could hear him cough all up and down the hall that last week . . . if she'd called the doctor . . ."

After a pause Mrs. Hickerson lifted her lids to catch his eye, then seemed to sink into a stupor. Burke leaned over and picked up a scrap of yellow yarn from under the bedside table. He slipped it into his pocket, then crossed the hall to Mrs. Block's room.

He had to speak twice before the woman raised her head and looked at him through vacant, clouded eyes. She furnished no new information, commenting only that "We miss him, something could have been done," when he brought up the fifth patient's name. Then her voice trailed off into apathetic mumbling. He thought he caught the words "house of death," but he knew further questions would be useless.

Self-discipline kept the Inspector from reacting openly when he glanced back just as he stepped into the hall. He saw Mrs. Block reach under the corner of the mattress, pull out a box of mints, and pop one into her mouth.

He found Miss Adams in the kitchen preparing luncheon trays of cold cuts and rye bread.

"Now, Miss Adams, I think you can clear up a few things."

"I'll try, sir."

"You say the patients wait in the lounge on Thursday mornings while you clean their rooms. Are they all in the lounge at the same time?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is anyone with them at that time?"

"No, sir."

"How about yesterday, Miss Adams, the day Mrs. Hammond died. Did anything unusual happen—I mean, any little thing that didn't happen every other Thursday?"

"Let's see. I remember changing the beds and then going to the kitchen to fix Mrs. Hammond's lunch. She had me bring it up to her room on Thursday since that was cleaning day downstairs. I took the tray out to the lounge and set it on the table by the hall door while I got parsley from the window box in the sun room."

"Did you always do that?"

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Richbitch always had to have parsley to

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pretty up her tray. I took her lunch up to her and that was the last time I saw her alive. After that I finished the cleaning. Nothing unusual at all, sir."

"What was on the tray?"

"The tray, sir?"

"Yes, Mrs. Hammond's tray. What food?"

"Hmm—stroganoff and salad and coffee—oh—and cranberry juice. Why, sir?"

"Never mind. Did the patients usually talk to one another when they met in the lounge?"

"Not often. They were so doped up they mostly just sat around half asleep. I do remember coming in once or twice and thinking they'd been whispering together, but if they were, they stopped as soon as they saw me."

The Inspector wrote something in his notebook.

"Now, Miss Adams, I want to hear all you know about this Mr. Alden. Just exactly what happened?"

"It's a sad story, Inspector. That poor man liked to smoke cigars, and what's the harm in that, I ask you? But Mrs. Hammond didn't like the smell. So what did she do but go in and open his window as wide as it would go—in the middle of the winter, mind you—and left him sitting there all afternoon while she pranced off downtown to shop. When I went in at five thirty with his supper tray, there he was, shivering and shaking and the room freezing cold. He'd tried to close the window, but he didn't have the strength."

"Is that when he got sick?"

"Well, sure. First he seemed to have a bad chest cold, and then he got this awful cough. He'd cough all night and be too tired to eat anything the next day. I tried to get Mrs. Hammond to call the doctor, but she said no, all he had was a cold."

"But it wasn't?"

"No. One day I found him talking out of his head and burning up with fever. That's when she finally sent for the doctor. He really bawled her out for not calling him sooner—said he could have saved the old man, but it was too late then. All the doors were open and those other poor souls heard every word. I tell you, Inspector, it was a crying shame."

"Well, don't you worry, Miss Adams. I'm going to see that something's done in this town to protect our old people from this sort of outrage. I'll get that ordinance changed to include every person in every rest home if I have to tear this town apart."

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"Attaboy, Inspector."

"Thank you, Miss Adams. You've been more help than you know."

Inspector Burke was deep in thought as he wandered back to the lounge, his notebook open in his hand.

It was incredible! Could one of these nice old people really have committed murder? He shook his head. No—but, by George, four of them might! He had a mental picture of them whispering together, planning, saving up their sedatives until they had a lethal handful, emptying the powder into—what?—an envelope?—then sifting it into the cranberry juice or over the stroganoff. The juice or the highly seasoned meat would disguise the taste of the barbiturate.

Yes, it was possible, all right. Those four old people could have got together one Thursday morning and decided to do away with their jailer, the jailer who had murdered poor Mr. Alden and had locked them in their rooms like caged animals.

A hell of a case, though, when you came right down to facts: a tale of three elderly women knitting complicated patterns, writing letters with a steady hand, manicuring fingernails, hiding candy, and one old man following the stock market—all supposedly too groggy to carry on a conversation for more than two minutes or to walk down the hall to the dining room.

"How can anybody prove it's really grogginess?" he muttered.

"What's that, sir?" The Inspector's assistant had just entered the room. "I know you told me to wait in the car, but you stayed so long I thought maybe you'd run onto something."

The Inspector slammed the notebook shut.

"No, not one scrap of real evidence"—then under his breath—"thank God!"

"O"

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Here is something a little different for the month of January—the month for traditional celebrations of The Great Detective, the month of The Baker Street Irregulars and the Scion Societies and their annual dinners . . .

We glean from the author's letters: Russell McLauchlin was born in Detroit, where he still lives. Michigan, Cornell, and Wayne State Universities "poured their learning into his skull," and "the days of his years are now in excess of the Scriptural limit." For more than 30 years Mr. McLauchlin was a member of the editorial staff of the *Detroit News.* He left the paper in 1954 to do "teaching chores" at various universities, and he "still has a tenuous connection with the University of Detroit as a veteran member of a radio quiz program broadcast weekly under the title of 'Ask the Professor,' which is carried by over 70 stations, with Samoa the most remote."

Sherlock Holmes, in all his faces and facets, has long been one of Mr. McLauchlin's hobbies. He is the founder of the Amateur Mendicant Society, the Detroit branch of The Baker Street Irregulars. "My Sherlockian focus," he writes, "is less sharp nowadays, for I am aged and forlorn, and all, all are gone, the old familiar faces." (Not all, thank the Lord.) "Today it is directed toward Kipling, to recall my youth, and to Shakespeare, to teach me humbleness . . .

"The living theater's decline fills me with sorrow, for in it I found an interest amounting to passion. I was a reporter for the *News* of things theatrical, and for a good many seasons its drama editor . . .

"When I was very young I had some experience with a tortured French plateau called the Argonne . . ."

It is this Grand Old Man who, about 25 years ago, wrote the charming "Teatime in Baker Street" for the Theater Arts Club of Detroit, in which his wife was and still is active. The one-act play was performed twice by the Club, an all-women's organization, and once, a quarter of a century ago, on television, and has once been in print, almost 25 years ago, in *The Baker Street Journal* . . . all, as you see, "far away and long ago."

So it is time, in the cycle of such things, to bring back this

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delightful one-act play—if for no other reason than to re-celebrate Women's Liberation!

TEATIME IN BAKER STREET

by RUSSELL McLAUCHLIN

The rising curtain discloses a comfortably furnished, unpretentious sitting room of the late Victorian period. The back wall is broken by an arch through which are visible: left, the beginning of a long straight staircase; right, part of the street door. To the right of this arch is a heavily curtained bay window. To the left is a marble-manteled fireplace. Center stage is a well-equipped tea table at which MRS. HUDSON and MRS. WIGGINS are in the act of enjoying afternoon tea. MRS. HUDSON, being the landlady of the premises and impressed with her position in life, is not above practicing certain elegancies of speech and deportment; after all, she presides over the most famous address in London. But MRS. WIGGINS is cockney, pure and unashamed.

As the curtain ascends, we are aware that a conversation is in progress and that MRS. WIGGINS is moderately annoyed about something. MRS. HUDSON, who is ample-bosomed and benign, wears a placating expression, befitting the chatelaine of 221B Baker Street, in London of 1890.

MRS. HUDSON: I don't see what you're so upset about, Mrs. Wiggins.

MRS. WIGGINS: I'm upset, as you're pleased to call it, because that man takes my boy Albert away from his duty and sends him the Lord knows where—to the docks and the slums and into danger and mischief I can't a-bear to think of. And all for a shilling a day, never a penny more. It's a sin and a shame, that's what it is!

MRS. HUDSON: Well, well, he's a fine man and your Albert may learn to be like him some day. *(Points upward)* He's upstairs now solving a crime. And all good people should be glad when crimes are solved.

MRS. WIGGINS: I think I'm as good as the next one, thank you kindly, ma'am; but I don't want my Albert hobnobbing with the riffraff of the docks for a shilling a day.

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MRS. HUDSON: But your Albert is helping to solve crimes and capture criminals. And maybe some day he'll grow up to be a grand Bow Street magistrate; and then you'd be proud, I'll be bound.

MRS. WIGGINS: Thank you, I'd rather he'd stay home and mind his lessons.

MRS. HUDSON: I'm sorry, Mrs. Wiggins, that you don't see him as we do. *(Points upward)* And now, when you've quite done with your tea, perhaps you'll be so kind as to say good afternoon; for the fact is, I'm expecting a visitor.

MRS. WIGGINS: I'm sure I'd be happy to meet your friends, Mrs. Hudson.

MRS. HUDSON: That would be lovely, of course. But this isn't one of my friends. It's a lady, it is, that's coming on a matter of business; very important business. You see, as his landlady, I'm not always my own mistress. It's a great responsibility to keep house for a man like him.

MRS. WIGGINS: Everybody to her own taste, as the old woman said when she kissed the cow.

MRS. HUDSON: *(bridling a trifle, but still the refined hostess)* I'm sure, Mrs. Wiggins, there's no need to mention cows in this house. *(A bell rings.)* There. It's him now. You'll excuse me, please, till I see what's wanted.

(Mrs. Hudson exits in a bustling manner and disappears up the stairs, whereupon Mrs. Wiggins, surprisingly, becomes furtive. She fumbles in her reticule, from which she draws a tiny object, wrapped in paper. She glances hurriedly around for a place of concealment, crosses to the mantel, and drops the object into an ornamental vase. She resumes her chair and recaptures her manner of relative tranquillity just as Mrs. Hudson comes down the stairs and re-enters the room with an air of determination.)

MRS. HUDSON: He wants your Albert, Mrs. Wiggins, so if you'll please—

MRS. WIGGINS: If I'll please go home and send my boy on another of those heathenish errands? I'll do no such thing. *(She composes herself.)* If I might trouble you for another dish of tea, Mrs. Hudson, ma'am.

(She receives it as another bell of different pitch is heard.)

MRS. HUDSON: Now. It's my visitor. If you'd only gone when—

(She interrupts herself to pass through the arch, open the street door, and make sounds of affectionate surprise at the visitor, evidently not the one expected. She returns immedi-

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ately, escorting the young, pretty, and patrician Mrs. Watson, exemplar of the gently bred Victorian, but capable of much spirit.)

MRS. HUDSON: Miss Mary, ma'am, please be acquainted with Mrs. Wiggins. This is Mrs. Watson, Mrs. Wiggins.

MRS. WATSON: How do you do, Mrs. Wiggins?

MRS. WIGGINS: How do you do, thank you, ma'am? *(She drops a half curtsy, looks awkwardly around, and excuses herself.)* I was just going. Thank you for the lovely tea, Mrs. Hudson. And I'm sure I wish you a good day, Mrs. Watson.

(Mrs. Wiggins departs in some confusion, leaving Mrs. Hudson irritated and Mrs. Watson amused.)

MRS. HUDSON: That woman! She upsets me so! Do sit down. *(Both do so and refreshments begin to flow.)* I wasn't expecting you, Miss Mary. There's someone else coming. Is anything the matter, dear?

MRS. WATSON: There certainly is. Do you know where my husband is?

MRS. HUDSON: He's upstairs this very blessed minute.

MRS. WATSON: I was sure of it. *(She gives an exasperated sigh.)* What are they doing?

MRS. HUDSON: They're solving a crime.

MRS. WATSON: Solving a crime my foot! Just the day before yesterday, Mrs. Hudson, while we were sitting at supper, one of those wretched telegrams came. And what did my husband do? I needn't tell you what he did. He packed his bag, went next door, asked Dr. Anstruther to mind his patients, and away he went, leaving me without a notion of where he'd gone.

MRS. HUDSON: It's very hard, I know, Miss Mary, dear.

MRS. WATSON: I knew a doctor's wife needn't expect a paradise on earth. But when it comes to saying goodbye to my husband whenever that man snaps his fingers—well, what kind of married life do you call it? Sometimes I never see him for weeks on end.

MRS. HUDSON: Do have some more tea, Miss Mary.

(The cup that tranquillizes is replenished and Mrs. Watson grows more composed.)

MRS. WATSON: You said you were expecting someone?

MRS. HUDSON: I am. And it's the strangest thing. I had a note from somebody named Mrs. Norton. And she's coming here this very day and hour.

MRS. WATSON: Mrs. Norton?

MRS. HUDSON: Mrs. Godfrey Norton. She said in her note that she used to live in

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London and now she and her husband are here on a visit, staying at the Langham, which isn't far from here, as you know. Who she is and what she wants, I've no more idea than a babe unborn.

MRS. WATSON: Do you know, I believe I know who she is.

MRS. HUDSON: Who?

MRS. WATSON: Wasn't Godfrey Norton the name of that lawyer Irene Adler married?

MRS. HUDSON: Irene Adler! God preserve us all!

MRS. WATSON: I'm sure I'm right. They left after all that business about that ridiculous king.

MRS. HUDSON: They did. They did, as true as I live and breathe. The King of Bohemia, it was, that went right up those stairs and dressed like an organ-grinder's monkey. Dearie me, it's a small world. What could Irene Adler want with me?

MRS. WATSON: Depend upon it, Mrs. Hudson, it's something to do with him. *(She adopts Mrs. Hudson's habit of pointing upward.)* I don't suppose I should stay. After all, she's not a very nice woman, is she?

MRS. HUDSON: No, dear, that she's not. And I always say, it makes no difference if it's a king or a chimney sweep. It's all the same principle.

MRS. WATSON: The same lack of principle.

MRS. HUDSON: That's a true word and well said. But I'll have to let her in. You know, he always admired her. He calls her *THE* woman. To this very day he does.

MRS. WATSON: As if I didn't know. Well, I'll have to admit that I'm curious to see her. *(She makes a brief struggle with her social conscience.)* Mrs. Hudson, I haven't a thing in the world to do now that I've located my husband, and just where I knew he'd be. Do you think it would be all right if I stayed here and had my tea with you, as if I didn't know she was coming?

MRS. HUDSON: Of course it'll be all right. Just have another cup and we'll be sitting here, all cozy-like, when she rings the bell.

MRS. WATSON: Tell me, Mrs. Hudson, do you know what this is all about upstairs?

MRS. HUDSON: It's about that robbery at the Northumberland Hotel.

MRS. WATSON: You mean the jewel robbery? The Countess of Morcar's Blue Carbuncle?

MRS. HUDSON: The very same. I heard all about it last night.

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MRS. WATSON: You don't mean to tell me you listened!

MRS. HUDSON: *(deeply shocked)* I should say not. I couldn't help hearing about it. That Mr. Lestrade from Scotland Yard was here. And they went at it hammer and tongs upstairs. Then, when that Mr. Lestrade was leaving, he stood at the foot of the stairs and *he* stood on the landing and they argued at the top of their lungs. Hear about it! It's a wonder to me the waxworks didn't hear about it, up at Madame Tussaud's.

MRS. WATSON: Well, I suppose this is what we have to expect when all the detectives in London are on a case. But I certainly thought when I married Dr. Watson that he'd be a doctor, not a detective's assistant. Do you realize, Mrs. Hudson— *(The front doorbell rings.)* Oh, there she is now!

(Mrs. Hudson exits; her words of greeting are audible and she returns with Mrs. Norton, who is about Mrs. Watson's age; she is attractive and modish, and when she speaks, exhibits an American accent. Mrs. Norton enters briskly, stopping in surprise on seeing Mrs. Watson, who rises, a little confused.)

MRS. HUDSON: Mrs. Norton, ma'am, this is Mrs. Watson.

MRS. NORTON: Oh, the doctor's wife! I'm perfectly delighted to meet you, Mrs. Watson. *(Mrs. Watson succumbs to this cordiality.)* Is the doctor here?

MRS. HUDSON: *(points upward)* He's upstairs with *him.*

MRS. NORTON: Well, this is certainly like old times.

MRS. WATSON: I'm very glad to meet you, Mrs. Norton. If I'm right in thinking that you're Irene Adler, then, dear me, you really are an old friend.

MRS. NORTON: Yes, I'm Irene Adler. And I'd like to take this opportunity of telling you how much I appreciate Dr. Watson's talents as a story-teller. Why, I'm positively famous and it's all because of him. All my singing in all the great opera houses never gave me half the reputation I acquired from one little narrative by Dr. Watson.

(All this captivates Mrs. Watson.)

MRS. HUDSON: Do sit down, ladies, and let me pour you some tea.

(They act on this suggestion in great harmony and the scene becomes purely social. Mrs. Watson, her misgivings forgotten, is entranced with this poised woman of the world. Mrs. Hudson beams.)

MRS. WATSON: Now do tell us, dear Mrs. Norton, what brings you here.

MRS. NORTON: I don't

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wonder that you're curious. Well, the fact is—I suppose you both know that, some years ago, I was quite a friend of the King of Bohemia. If you've read Dr. Watson's story, and of course you have, then you remember there was a photograph.

MRS. WATSON: I remember.

MRS. HUDSON: Don't we all! He tried to get the picture but you were too many for him. You're the only person living, Mrs. Norton, ma'am, that ever outwitted him. *(Points upward)* I've had many a chuckle over it, I can tell you.

MRS. NORTON: Oh, it wasn't really a case of outwitting. I had the picture and the King hired him to recover it. He found out where I kept it and if he hadn't been a chivalrous gentleman he'd have taken it, under my very nose. Maybe it was because I used to be an actress. Actresses learn to use their charm, you know, in all their dealings with the other sex.

MRS. WATSON: I'm sure, Mrs. Norton, that your charm is perfectly evident to one of your own sex.

MRS. NORTON: That's so good of you. Well, ladies, that photograph has been on my conscience for a long time. You see, I'm not much interested in the King these days. I suppose the poor man is still worried about the picture, but I'd just as soon start the fire with it. But your husband's friend, Mrs. Watson, is quite another matter. You say you've chuckled over it, Mrs. Hudson. I'm afraid that perhaps he has blushed over it. So when Godfrey and I had to return to London I just packed up the picture and brought it with me. *(She unwraps a package which she has been carrying.)* See, here it is—young Miss Adler and her royal friend.

(Both ladies rise and examine the picture with extreme interest.)

MRS. WATSON: So that's the King of Bohemia. I don't think he's so much.

MRS. HUDSON: He looks like nothing at all, if you ask me.

MRS. WATSON: But it's a lovely picture of you.

MRS. HUDSON: It's beautiful.

MRS. WATSON: And now you've brought it back to return it. I think that's splendid.

MRS. HUDSON: Do you want to leave it with me?

MRS. NORTON: No, indeed, I don't. I want to maintain the reputation for cleverness that Dr. Watson gave me. I want to return it in some very spectacular manner.

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MRS. HUDSON: Well, I declare!

MRS. NORTON: But how am I going to do it? You two must help me think of a way.

MRS. WATSON: Well—let me see.

(There is a small sound at the front door, caught by Mrs. Hudson's alert ear. She holds up her finger, goes through the arch to the door, returning immediately with an envelope.)

MRS. HUDSON: I thought I heard a sound at the door. Somebody dropped this through the slot. It's for him. *(Points upward)*

MRS. NORTON: And, of course, it solves our problem.

MRS. WATSON: Solves our problem? Whatever do you mean?

MRS. NORTON: May I have it, please? *(She takes the envelope from the puzzled Mrs. Hudson.)* I have an idea. Why couldn't we steam this open and I'll slip the picture inside it? And then you'll carry it up and hand it to him. And he'll open the envelope and there will be the picture. And won't he be surprised! Because neither of you will breathe a word about my being here.

MRS. WATSON: Open the letter! Dear me, we can't do that!

MRS. HUDSON: I never heard of such a thing!

(But Mrs. Norton is a self-reliant lady. And the others, tempted by the idea, make only the feeblest gestures of prevention. So Mrs. Norton holds the envelope over the spout of the teapot, draws back the flap, and carefully removes an enclosure.)

MRS. NORTON: There it comes. Now! Why, what in the world?

MRS. WATSON: What is it?

MRS. NORTON: This letter. I couldn't help seeing it. I don't understand.

MRS. HUDSON: What does it say?

MRS. NORTON: I don't like to read it. But—

MRS. WATSON: Oh, read it!

MRS. NORTON: Very well. Here goes: "You are faced, my dear sir, with inevitable destruction if you do not accommodate my wishes. I refer to the Countess of Morcar's Blue Carbuncle, which I know to be in your possession, having traced it to your address. This fabulous jewel was abstracted from my pocket by one of your misguided but artful agents as I left the Northumberland Hotel on Tuesday last. The humiliation of having my pocket picked is, naturally, very great. But I shall enjoy ample atonement when I stand before you, in your own residence, and see you place the jewel in my

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hand. That is why it suits my whim to call for it myself. You will understand that I have made all the streets safe, for a radius of a quarter mile from your residence. You may expect me within fifteen minutes of your receipt of this letter. I know that you are at home. I know that you have the jewel. I know that you have no alternative to obeying my instructions. Your own intelligence will tell you the same thing. I shall see you in fifteen minutes. Yours faithfully, James Moriarty."

(During the reading of this letter Mesdames Watson and Hudson show increasing signs of great disturbance. When the reading is finished they fall back in their chairs, two images of complete consternation.)

MRS. HUDSON: God save us all!

MRS. WATSON: Amen.

MRS. HUDSON: It's the end. That's what it is. The end.

MRS. WATSON: The end indeed.

MRS. NORTON: But what is all this, ladies? Who is James Moriarty?

THE LADIES TOGETHER: The Professor!

MRS. NORTON: What Professor?

MRS. WATSON: Mrs. Norton, you have been long away from London and that is why you do not know that Professor Moriarty is the Napoleon of crime—the center and cause of all the wickedness in the city.

MRS. NORTON: A criminal?

MRS. WATSON: The arch-criminal.

MRS. NORTON: But why don't the police—?

MRS. WATSON: The police are helpless against him. He has one of the great brains of the century. He controls one of the great organizations of the age. He has only one foeman worthy of his steel—that man who sits above us at this moment. It is a life-and-death duel between them.

MRS. HUDSON: That I should live to see the day the Professor comes to my own house! I'd as soon see Satan himself. I'd rather see Satan. Prayers are good against Satan. But no prayers can scare the Professor.

MRS. NORTON: Of course I read about the jewel robbery in the paper. But this Professor is news to me.

MRS. HUDSON: Not for long he won't be, Mrs. Norton, ma'am! It was a sorry day for you when you came to this house. None of us will be alive when we go to bed tonight.

MRS. WATSON: Mrs. Hudson, do you suppose that *he* really has the Blue Carbuncle?

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MRS. HUDSON: How could he? Neither he nor the doctor has set foot outside that door for two days. But will that matter to the Professor? Not a bit of it! He'll come here and murder us all and burn down the house.

MRS. WATSON: I don't wish to be too alarming, Mrs. Norton, but really Mrs. Hudson is right. We are in very great danger.

MRS. NORTON: But this is absurd! How could one wicked man be so powerful in a civilized city?

MRS. WATSON: It's not at all absurd. The danger is real.

MRS. HUDSON: *(she rises and takes the letter)* And the time is short. I'll take this letter upstairs now and have my last look at the two of 'em, bless their poor desperate hearts.

(But Mrs. Watson, the gentle, rises and opposes her. The Victorian worm is about to turn.)

MRS. WATSON: The Professor isn't going upstairs! Give me that letter. Listen to me, you two! My husband is upstairs. Do you think for a moment that I'm going to see him baited with that letter? If you do you don't know Captain Morstan's daughter. No, ladies. That letter stays here. And we three must think of a way to keep the Professor downstairs too.

MRS. HUDSON: But how?

MRS. WATSON: I don't know. But there must be a way. Somehow or other we'll keep him here; and I'll fling open the window and scream—

MRS. NORTON: But the streets. The letter says—

MRS. WATSON: Bother the streets! I'll scream so loud they'll hear me at Charing Cross.

MRS. HUDSON: Miss Mary, dear. Hadn't we better leave it to the men? They know—

MRS. WATSON: A precious lot they know! If we leave it to those two great loonies we'll all be dead in fifteen minutes!

MRS. NORTON: Well, I must say, I'm beginning to agree with you. My goodness, I thought kings and queens were exciting, but they're no match for a Professor in a quiet London street.

MRS. HUDSON: But what can we do, three frail women like we are?

MRS. NORTON: Oh, we're not so frail. And there *are* three of us. Will he come alone?

MRS. WATSON: I imagine he will. The letter seemed to say so. Maybe it's a matter of pride with him.

MRS. HUDSON: You're right. He's a prideful man. With all his other wickedness he has the sin of pride I'm sure he'll come alone.

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MRS. NORTON: Do you suppose he'll ring the doorbell?

MRS. HUDSON: That he will. The Professor is a gentleman.

MRS. NORTON: A gentleman! Do you mean to say that king-cutthroat of London is a gentleman?

MRS. HUDSON: It's hard to explain.

MRS. WATSON: Never mind explaining. We haven't time for a chat about the Professor's manners. Heavens, ladies, don't you realize we're in danger of our lives?

MRS. NORTON: We'll have to devise a plan, just as if we were soldiers defending a fort.

MRS. HUDSON: We'll have to have a captain.

MRS. WATSON: I nominate you for captain, Mrs. Norton.

MRS. HUDSON: So do I. Give us your orders, ma'am, if you please.

MRS. NORTON: Well, the first thing is weapons and the second thing is strategy. Have you any weapons, Mrs. Hudson?

MRS. HUDSON: *(doubtfully)* There's the poker and the shovel. *(She crosses to the fireplace and obtains these articles.)* But we'll need three.

MRS. NORTON: Here's something strong-looking. *(At the mantel she seizes the ornamental vase.)* Now, when your Professor comes to the door you answer it, Mrs. Hudson, and hold the poker behind your back. Mrs. Watson, you stand just inside the arch, with the shovel. I'll stand in the arch and the moment he's inside I'll throw this vase at his face. Then Mrs. Hudson will hit him over the head with the poker and Mrs. Watson will spring out and hit him with the shovel. All that will make him fall down. And we'll sit on him and scream and the men will rush downstairs with their revolvers.

MRS. HUDSON: Wonderful, wonderful! You should have been a general, like dear General Gordon.

MRS. WATSON: It's marvelous. I'm sure we can do it.

MRS. NORTON: We must rehearse it.

MRS. WATSON: Rehearse it! Yes!

MRS. HUDSON: Give your orders, ma'am.

MRS. NORTON: Hmm. Soldiers, attention! *(They stiffen.)* Take your battle positions! *(They do so.)* Now, when I count three, that will mean the Professor has entered and we'll all attack. One, two, three!

(At the count of three Mrs. Hudson bows obsequiously at the closed door, Mrs. Watson raises her shovel, and Mrs. Norton holds the vase aloft, in a

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throwing position. A small object falls from the upended vase to the floor.)

MRS. NORTON: Oh, something fell!

MRS. HUDSON: Let me see.

(She crosses, takes up the tiny package and unwraps it under the curious gaze of her companions. When the paper is removed Mrs. Hudson is seen to hold a large sparkling jewel—the Countess of Morcar's Blue Carbuncle.)

MRS. NORTON: Good gracious, Mrs. Hudson! Have you been robbing the Wakefield Tower? That looks like one of the crown jewels.

MRS. HUDSON: God bless my soul! Is it the Koh-i-noor?

MRS. WATSON: No, of course it isn't. But what is it?

MRS. NORTON: Isn't it yours, Mrs. Hudson?

MRS. HUDSON: Mine! Mercy, no! And I'll swear it wasn't in the vase when I dusted this morning.

(A light of conviction suddenly illumines Mrs. Watson's eye.)

MRS. WATSON: Ladies! I know what it is. It's the Countess of Morcar's Blue Carbuncle!

MRS. HUDSON: No!

MRS. NORTON: But how can that be?

MRS. WATSON: It is. I tell you it is. There isn't anything else with that strange blue color. I saw a replica of it in a window on Bond Street. Besides, it's been described in all the papers. I *know* it's the Blue Carbuncle.

(Such emphasis from gentle Mary convinces the others.)

MRS. HUDSON: And in my old vase!

MRS. NORTON: But how did it get there?

MRS. HUDSON: Hark!

(There is a sound at the door. All three stiffen and look in terror into the hall.)

MRS. NORTON: So he didn't ring the bell!

(The door begins to open and Mrs. Hudson, with an automatic motion, places the jewel on the tea table. All three compose a tableau as the door swings wide and there enters—a little boy. It is Albert Wiggins. He closes the door with a bang and bounces in through the arch.)

MRS. HUDSON: Albert Wiggins! Land sakes' alive! How did you get in?

ALBERT: Wiv me key! I've a key, I 'ave.

MRS. HUDSON: What are you doing here?

ALBERT: I 'eard that 'e wanted me and 'ere I am!

MRS. HUDSON: It's young Master Wiggins, ladies—him that's leader of those young scamps that call themselves the

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Baker Street Irregulars. They go on errands-like.

ALBERT: Errands! *(He is profoundly offended.)* We go and solve crimes for 'im. I nearly got killed, I did, comin' 'ere from the Marylebone Road. There was villains in every doorway. But I knowed 'em, I did, and I got 'ere!

MRS. HUDSON: You're a brave boy.

ALBERT: I'm captain of the Baker Street Irregulars, I am! I belong to the detective-police!

MRS. NORTON: I'm very glad to see you, Albert. And I agree with Mrs. Hudson that you're very brave.

MRS. WATSON: And so do I. You're a fine young man.

ALBERT: Where is 'e? *(Mrs. Hudson points upward and as Albert's eye follows, it lights on the jewel on the tea table.)* Eh! Where did you get that? *(He becomes almost hysterical.)* I s'y, where did you get that?

MRS. HUDSON: What do you know about it, Albert?

ALBERT: What do I know abaht it? That's a good 'un, that is! Didn't I pick the old Perfessor's pocket? Didn't I carry it 'ome in my own pocket? Didn't me muvver find it and tyke it aw'y from me?

MRS. NORTON: *You* took the jewel?

ALBERT: I'm tellin' you, ain't I? Me muvver went and took it and she says I'll land us all in jyle. And I went to bed wivvout me tea. Me muvver says she'll tyke it and put it somewhere where somebody'll find it, accidental-like. There's a reward out for it. But me muvver don't want no reward. She only wants to be syfe, she does, and she don't want me to get 'ung. And she 'ides it and I'm ashymed to tell *'im* that it's gone and me muvver, she won't tell what she done wiv it. Does 'e know it's 'ere? 'Ow did you get it?

MRS. HUDSON: Never mind, Albert. Well, ladies, now you see how the Professor works. He had Mrs. Wiggins followed.

ALBERT: Gor blimey! The Perfessor tryled me muvver!

MRS. WATSON: And the Professor will be—

MRS. HUDSON: Sh-h-h! Albert, wouldn't you like to come out to the scullery and have a great big piece of cake for being such a brave boy?

ALBERT: Not arf, I wouldn't.

MRS. HUDSON: Come on then.

(She leads the way, Albert enthusiastically following, out the arch and beyond the stairs.)

MRS. NORTON: I'm beginning to see what you mean about the Professor. This is terribly exciting!

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MRS. WATSON: It's much more than exciting, Mrs. Norton. That poor boy! Do you realize that he ran through almost certain death to get here?

MRS. NORTON: The man upstairs seems to command remarkable loyalty.

MRS. WATSON: If we get out of this alive you must have luncheon with me one day soon and I'll explain to you exactly how remarkable that loyalty is.

MRS. NORTON: As a matter of fact, Mrs. Watson, I've been fairly loyal to him myself, today. I didn't know I was in peril of my life, of course, but I did put my pride in my pocket about that photograph.

MRS. WATSON: You did, indeed. And I believe I'm going to call you Irene.

MRS. NORTON: Thank you, Mary.

(Mrs. Hudson returns alone.)

MRS. WATSON: Is Albert happy, Mrs. Hudson?

MRS. HUDSON: Bless his heart, he's eating a piece of cake almost the size of himself. He—

(There is a jangling of the doorbell.)

ALL THREE TOGETHER: The Professor!

MRS. NORTON: Battle positions, ladies!

(They spring to action.)

MRS. HUDSON: Wait a moment!

(She takes the jewel from the table.)

MRS. NORTON: What's that for?

MRS. HUDSON: Bait!

(Mrs. Hudson goes through the arch, while Mrs. Watson and Mrs. Norton take their stations. Mrs. Hudson opens the door, makes a deep bow, and raises her right hand, which holds the jewel. She backs into the room, bowing, and there follows a remarkable-looking man whose hand attempts to clutch the jewel. But Mrs. Hudson eludes his grasp. It is Professor Moriarty, tall and stooped, wearing a slouch hat and an Inverness cape. He follows Mrs. Hudson, just one step inside the arch. Mrs. Norton throws the vase, Mrs. Watson strikes with the shovel, and Mrs. Hudson administers the coup de grace *with the poker. The Professor sinks to his knees, partially stunned.)*

MRS. HUDSON: There! You old devil!

MRS. NORTON: Come on, girls, we can finish this ourselves! Some rope, Mrs. Hudson! Quick!

(Mrs. Watson and Mrs. Norton plop the semiconscious Professor into a chair and Mrs. Norton expertly gags him with his own muffler. Mrs. Hudson

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produces a ball of strong twine from a drawer in the tea table. With this all three bind the weakly struggling Professor in a most unprofessional but completely efficient manner. Meanwhile, Albert enters, still holding a great wedge of cake. With a glad cry he darts forward, gives the Professor a competent frisking with his free hand, and draws forth a revolver. With this Albert covers his enemy, who comes to full consciousness and struggles feebly against his bonds. The triumphant ladies compose a tableau of breathless victory around the Professor's chair as Albert begins a war dance and song of exultation, punctuated by bites of cake.)

ALBERT: We got the old Perfessor! We got the dirty thief! 'E carn't move, 'e carn't! 'E's goin' to jyle, 'e is!

MRS. HUDSON: Yes, we've certainly got him. And look here. *(She exhibits the jewel.)* Here's this miserable whatyoumaycallit that caused all the trouble.

MRS. WATSON: And do you realize, ladies, that we've solved the crime—all by ourselves?

MRS. NORTON: Why, so we have. *(She breaks into laughter as she makes Mrs. Hudson's old gesture of pointing upward.)* So, don't you think, my fellow soldiers and detectives, that it's time for us to call—Mr. Sherlock Holmes?

CURTAIN

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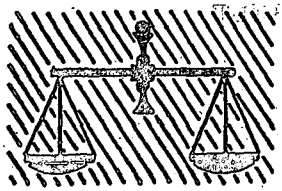

THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

If prejudice may be allowed, very heartily I now dislike and distrust that word "suspense." No doubt it had a certain cogency when Miss Kahn first applied it to the admirable Harper list. But today almost every attempt at mystery has come, rightly or wrongly, to be so described. If it's a good mystery, that's very high praise; let the publisher say so, disdaining weaker terms. Though I myself prefer "detective" novel, the highest praise, this word may be used only when there has been complete fair play with clues, a feature less rare than some critics appear to think.

Again we are to consider four titles, three novels and a book of unsolved enigmas from real life. Of the three fictions, one first novel and two second tries, each is a first-class mystery which plays strictly fair. At one stride, then, we have a whole trio of new candidates for homicidal honors. With great pleasure the old pastrycook welcomes them to the bakery.

Bill Pronzini's *The Snatch* (Random House, $5.95) is told in the first person by a private investigator whose name we never learn, but whom we can welcome with the heartiest handshake. Though he professes admiration for the ancient pulp fictions of Hammett and Chandler, this unnamed sleuth bears no resemblance to dull, swollen-headed snarlers like Spade or Marlowe, whose famed "toughness" was mainly bad manners and who cultivated an unpleasant personality as their stock in trade. Mistakenly called Old Bear by his nagging girl friend, our protagonist forms an immensely likeable addition to the roster; it seems we shall meet him again.

When the nine-year-old son of Financial Speculator Louis Martinetti is kidnapped, with a ransom demand for $300,000, the boy's frantic father has been warned that no member of the family must carry this money to any drop. In semi-isolation on the Peninsula with his wife and his few friends—Dean Proxmire, secretary, and Allan Channing, that fish-blooded tycoon—Martinetti summons Mr. No Name from San Francisco to make the drop.

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Most kidnapping stories follow a conventional pattern. This one explodes in every new direction of twist and violence, with Mr. Nameless following Mr. Faceless down dark, dangerous roads to a neatly prepared surprise end. Not quite the author's maiden effort, but mark it A plus.

In *The Detective Wore Silk Drawers*, by Peter Lovesey (Dodd, Mead, $4.95), Mr. Lovesey follows last year's *Wobble to Death* with a second venture into the world of late Victorian sport: this time no walking race at a pace designed to kill, but the brutal, still more deadly prize ring in 1880.

Well-born, well-educated Metropolitan Police Constable Henry Jago, noted amateur boxer, must probe the riddle of a headless, unidentified pugilist found in the Thames. At Radstock Hall, under the supervision of Robert D'Estin and fascinating Isabel Vibart, they train the amateur to exhaustion for his bloody, bare-knuckle encounter with an unbeatable professional. After murder has visited Radstock Hall itself, Sergeant Cribb of Scotland Yard fits together the solution and smashes a vicious racket in this vivid period-piece of *mores* long gone by.

Though the mystery in *The Murders on the Square*, by Theodore George (Dodd, Mead, $4.95), is solved less by ratiocination than by routine police work, none the less it provides an ingenious detective story supported by visible evidence.

In quiet St. Paul's Square, lower Manhattan, four girls of very different types are messily slain by a Jack-the-Ripper kind of menace on the loose. Lieutenant Zimmerman and Sergeant Donofrio, those very human policemen, must nail their quarry amid gathering panic. If the identity of the murderer proves far from a shock finale, this whole affair has been so expert and so convincing that we feel no disappointment. An accomplished first novel which promises even better investigations to come.

Dealing in the main with unexplained deaths through the years, from Amy Robsart in 1560 to Dag Hammarskjold only a decade ago, with problems of identity in doubt or of men and women who vanished, Kenneth B. Platnick's *Great Mysteries of History* (Stackpole, $6.95) in sixteen well-presented cases also takes a look at lost continents, at inexplicable presences from the Abominable Snowman to the Loch Ness Monster, and at other factual puzzles as well. Here are the various answers; choose any or none. For, being myself a student of the unsolved picturesque, I strongly urge you to buy, borrow, or steal this book.

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a *NEW* "thriller" by

JOHN CHRISTOPHER

Quotes from reviews of John Christopher's novels: "strange, though always believable"... "terrifying story"... "written with fluency, color, and elegance"... "sensitive character development"... "insights often alarming"... "special kind of excitement"..."for best effects, read after midnight"... and "if the H. G. Wells of the fantastic stories has any true successor, it is fellow Englishman, John Christopher"...

We think you will find "The Island of Bright Birds" moving and disturbing, and chillingly neogothic...

THE ISLAND OF BRIGHT BIRDS

by JOHN CHRISTOPHER

The first time she heard him speak, he was describing how he made his own bread, a fairly ordinary subject for a Chelsea party of this kind. But there was something in the voice, a strength, which was not so usual, and she half turned from her own group to identify him.

He was a short, slenderly built man who yet contrived to look powerful. He was about 50, she thought, with silver-gray hair and a clipped silver-gray mustache, and it was plain that he kept himself in good physical condition. He moved his head, as though conscious of her gaze, and their eyes met. His were very blue, and direct, and she was the first to look away.

Later he spoke to her, catching her skillfully between groups, and getting her to himself.

"My name's Merronish, Adrian Merronish," he said. "Friend of John's. We knew each other in the war."

John and Helen Warrington were their hosts.

"I'm Angela Blake," she said.

"I wanted to talk to you," he said, "because you are so beautiful. But also because you

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are happy. I should think you are in love."

His sentences were short, but not clipped. Rather they carried an implication of flow, a wavelike hypnotic quality. What he said surprised but also pleased her. She said, laughing, "The last part's true."

"Is he here?"

She pointed. "Over there. The tall one with the fair curly hair."

He nodded in appraisal. "You make a handsome pair."

Peter, and her love for him, were the supremely important things in her life at that time.

"We are to be married next month," she said. "As soon as he has finished his present job, up in the wilds of Scotland. He's a development engineer."

Merronish said, "A development engineer. It sounds like an exciting profession. I don't do anything but live on an island. An island full of bright birds. Some day you must visit it."

She laughed again, glorying in a world that could offer islands and bright birds and her own true love.

"We'd love to," she said.

She spoke of him to Peter, as they went home together.

"Yes, I know," Peter said. "A rather interesting chap."

"Did he talk to you about his island?"

"Not much. He talked about my job mostly." He paused, considering this. "I suppose that's why I thought him interesting."

"He goes to the root of things," she said. "He told me I was happy, because I was in love."

Peter bent down to her, as a gust of breeze from the river ruffled the early summer leaves of the Embankment trees. With his mouth against her hair he asked her, "True?"

She squeezed his arm with her two hands. "So true."

Merronish called on her two weeks after the funeral. She opened the door, saw and recognized him, and remembered what he had said at their first meeting. There was no danger, she thought bitterly, of anyone saying that now. She did not look much in mirrors these days, but she knew her hair was lank and untidy, her skin blotched from crying.

"What is it?" she said stiffly.

"May I come in?"

"If you like."

He carried a great bunch of chrysanthemums and roses. She stood aside and he came in and put them on the hall table. He had the discreet solemnity of a professional mourner, she thought, but his blue eyes were still direct, seeking and holding.

"I saw John, and he told

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me," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you. For the flowers." She stared at them, hoping she would not cry again. "Can I get you a drink?"

She was sure he would say no, but he said yes, and took the seat she offered him. He sat there, watching patiently, while she got the drink; and afterward. He was waiting for her to talk. She had run from all company, even her family, since it happened, but now she felt it growing in her—the urge to tell her misery as once she had told her happiness.

She said, conscious of the dryness of her voice, "I don't know how much John told you. It was a hit-and-run accident. There was a good trout stream near where he was working, and he used to go fishing in the evening. They found him dead by the side of the road. No one saw it happen—no one even saw the car. There was a bend in the road. No footpath, of course. The police said the car must have come round very fast, and hit from behind."

She paused, seeing it again, as she had seen it so often. Merronish said, "Go on," in a gentle voice, and the tears came. She was alone again, in a melting universe of weeping, an ocean of which she could not remember the beginning or imagine the end.

At one point he gave her a handkerchief, but he might have been a robot serving her. When the outburst came to a sobbing, gasping end, she was almost surprised to find him still sitting there.

He waited until she was breathing steadily, and said, "Now go and get yourself ready and I will take you out to dinner."

She shook her head. "No. It's kind of you, but no. I want to stay here." She added petulantly, "I'm not hungry."

"Come all the same," he said. "Have a glass of wine while I eat. It will do you good not to be alone."

She thought about that for a moment, and knew it was true. Obediently she got up and went to her bedroom to make up her face.

She learned things about herself during the next weeks and months, and about grief. The bouts of wild angry misery were fewer, but as time stretched between them she became aware of a new horror that in some ways was worse. The nearest description she could put to it was boredom, but it was boredom of a kind new to her, a yawning listless pointlessness that staled and fouled her very being. In it she contemplated suicide, for the

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first time, but knew she could not command the energy even for that nihilistic resolve.

She had an overpowering need of something, anything, to distract her ears and eyes. She watched television in lethargic and fascinated irritation, and sometimes when the programs had ended she found herself staring for long periods at the empty screen.

Merronish returned two weeks later, and after that at more or less weekly intervals. He would come up to London one day and go back the next; he would not leave his island for longer than that at one time. She was guarded at first, but soon was simply glad of his kindness and attention, his unfailing patience with her.

She was becoming aware again of other people in the world, but with more irritability than pleasure. They talked when she did not want them to talk, and were silent or vapid when she needed speech and comfort.

Merronish was the remarkable exception. He sensed her moods and responded to them, talking at the right time and listening with the right, unobtrusive attention. From being apathetic about his visits, she grew to welcome them, and at last began to count the days between them. Autumn blurred into winter, and there were times when, because of bad weather and rough seas, he was late in visiting her. Thrown back on the unsatisfactory others, and on contemplation of the wound of grief, which still could bleed, she found herself missing him quite sharply.

The great reassuring thing, of course, was that nothing that could remotely be called sexual came between them. If there had been the slightest hint of desire in his attitude, she would have been repelled and would have turned him away. But there were only kindness and patience. He never attempted even to kiss her good night, and scarcely touched her beyond a handshake. Once or twice she wondered about this, seeking a motive behind his kindness; but for the most part she was content to accept it. And to let it nourish her.

He talked a lot about the island, and a picture of it grew in her mind. Rose-pink granite rocks, lulled by blue or lashed by gray-green seas—rabbit-cropped grass burnt by long days of sun—a wood sparkling with rain after a shower, and echoing with birds. A place of peace and beauty, remote from the world's miseries, armored by the waves against shock and change. And yet, she realized

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one day with a small tremor of surprise, she really knew very little about the island. His descriptions had been general, not particular. The thought whetted her curiosity; the next time he came, she would ask him questions.

But the answers she got were vague, and the picture remained as it had been—a mosaic of impressions, more a description of dream than reality. She could not be sure if it was a failure of communication or a deliberate evasiveness on his part. She even toyed with the idea that the island might not exist—might merely be some fantasy he had created for himself.

One day, on the telephone to Helen Warrington, she asked her about it, as tactfully as she could. Helen's reply was not helpful. No, she said, she did not know much about it. She and John had never been there. There had been talk of their going, but somehow it had never happened.

And Angela, putting down the telephone, realized that, although Merronish had talked of the place so much, he had never, since that first encounter, spoken of her visiting it.

It was spring again, the days lengthening and brightening, the earth stirring from its sleep, new green budding from old brown. She decided she would not ask him any more, kept to her resolve, and as soon as he had gone away, regretted it. There were spring storms, and it was nearly three weeks before he came again. Almost as soon as she saw him, she said, "The island—I would like to see it."

He smiled at her. "Of course."

"How soon?"

"In the summer." He brushed the silver-gray mustache down with the side of his finger. "The summer is the best time to visit the island."

As the train gathered speed leaving the station, she asked curiously, "Do you always travel down by train?"

He nodded from the facing seat in the first-class compartment which they had to themselves.

"Invariably. Motoring is no longer a pleasure. Except for one occasion I haven't driven since the war."

She looked out of the window. The sky was blue and empty over the sweltering city.

"It's a good day," she said, "to be leaving London."

"Yes. A good day to be going to the island."

"Tell me about it."

"No. Seeing is best. And you will see it soon."

"How soon? How long is the

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journey by boat?"

"Not much more than half an hour. We can do better than twenty knots on a day like this."

"You have a speedboat?"

"A twin-engined diesel. 'Hermes.'"

"Do any other boats go to the island?"

"There's a young fisherman who brings over any heavy stuff I need. No one else."

"Might people not go there while you're away?"

"It's unlikely. We're too far out for the small boats. And there's only one landing place, and that's a tricky one. Some nasty rocks, and the whole area's due for recharting."

"So you preserve your isolation."

"Yes. And hope to go on doing so."

In the late afternoon there was some cloud in the sky, but it was still hot. England was a haze on the horizon; the sea was smooth and glassy except for the bubbling, widening furrow of their wake.

She stared at the island, which now lay full ahead. A hummock of pink and green rising out of the calm blue waters—the pink of rock, the green of trees and grass. So it was true. It existed. She had not been sure till now.

"It's strange," she said.

"What?"

She raised her voice to be heard above the roar of the diesels. "I don't see any gulls."

"There are none."

"Why is that?"

"You'll see."

The landing place was round the other side and, as he had said, tricky. There was a tortuous and not very wide channel through rocks, and a short concrete jetty concealed behind a prow of granite. He handled the boat with skill and confidence, bringing her in to bump her rubber fenders gently against the jetty wall. There was an iron ladder by which they climbed ashore. He tied up and they climbed the hill to the house.

It was built of the island's granite, and had been scarcely noticeable from the sea; as they approached she realized it was larger than she had expected—a rambling place with more than a dozen windows on this side. The immediate approach was through a garden, and one in surprisingly good heart for land which, in rough weather, would probably be touched by the salt spray blowing up from the inlet. She saw roses and honeysuckle, and a cabbage palm bursting into white spiky flower. They entered the house through a terrace where there

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were various flowering shrubs, and ropes of clematis dropping their large blue blossoms from a covering lattice.

The house, undistinguished from outside, was beautifully appointed within. The furniture was good, of several different periods but in harmony, and the décor was in quiet splendid taste. While he was getting them a drink, she rubbed the wallpaper gently with the back of her hand. It was heavy, silky stuff, the Regency stripes strongly embossed. There were paintings on the walls: a Stubbs, a Fragonard, and two of Russell Flint's studies of nude girls bathing.

There was a change in him, she thought, since they had come ashore, a quickening into enthusiasm. He did not let her sit down with her drink, but took her at once on a tour of the ground floor. There was a library, with three walls shelved and glassed, and, behind the glass, gold leaf winking from dull greens and blues and reds of leather. Another fairly small room, looking out over the sea, was empty except for a few chairs, a table, and a harpsichord. The harpsichord was in light walnut, and the room was paneled to match. The kitchen, on the other hand, was all steel and plastic, with an electric mixer, a cooker, a deep-freeze, and a large blue refrigerator humming to itself.

"What about power?" she asked.

"A generator. I leave it on while I am away. It can run a week or more without attention."

"And who cleans and tidies?"

"I do. Not difficult. I am a tidy person by nature."

She said, "It's a lovely house."

He nodded, accepting this. "Leave your glass there. I want to show you the rest of the island."

She followed him obediently. They went up steps, along a path hemmed in by the blinding yellow of gorse and the white spears of sloe. The path branched and he pointed downward.

"My pool."

It was a tiny cove, with a minuscule beach of golden sand. A wall, which had been built between the two enclosing arms of rock, held in the water—full tides would wash over and refresh it. It looked very blue. Beyond it, higher land seemed to have been cut away in an inverted saddle.

"It is open to the setting sun," he said, "but I wanted the sun in the morning, as well. One can swim at dawn and watch the sun rise."

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They took the upward path. The wood started farther up, but below it there was a place, about 50 by 100 yards, where the ground was level, covered with short grass and pocked with holes. In the center of this small plateau a bird was perched on a padded hoop.

At the sight of it she exclaimed, "An eagle?"

"A falcon, but not an eagle. The earl's bird. An eagle for an emperor, a peregrine for an earl. A tiercel."

"Tiercel?"

"The male of the species. A third smaller than the female, but more powerful."

"And you go away and leave him tethered?"

"His rein takes him to the edge of the wood." He gestured toward the holes which she saw were littered with droppings. "He gets at least one fat rabbit, morning and evening."

"But why?" she asked. "Why a falcon here?"

"For protection," he said simply. "To guard my bright birds."

As they approached the wood she saw them—flashes of emerald, of blue, of yellow. She did not recognize them at first, but then their harsh chatter identified them. They were grass parakeets—budgerigars. She saw more and more, of many different colors and combinations of colors—turquoise, opaline, pearl-gray, mauve, olive, cobalt.

"They live here wild?"

"Yes. I have put up nesting boxes, and I give them seed. Apart from that they are on their own. The losses were heavy at first. Some died, some stupidly flew out to sea. I brought in more, and they adapted."

"But I thought other birds attacked them?"

"There are no other birds."

She realized that she had not seen any, that she had heard only the parakeets.

"They were attacked at the beginning," he explained. "That was when I brought the peregrine in. I tamed and trained him. He cleared the sky in a couple of months, and I restocked. Some gulls come in from time to time, and he kills them."

They were in the wood, the path still winding up. The colored birds flashed overhead.

"You killed them all?" she said in horror.

"It was the only thing to do."

The wood was a tonsure round the island; its summit and center were open. They came out into meadow grass. The birds were here, too, hanging onto the long grass and

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pecking at the seeds. There was a summerhouse, quite substantially built, with a veranda.

When he opened the door she saw that it was furnished with cushioned wicker chairs, a couch, a low table. He pressed a button just inside the door and to her amazement there was music, the precise ecstasy of a piano.

"*The Art of Fugue*," he said. He smiled. "No magic. A land line to a tape recorder in the house. I switched it on before I left." He looked at her searchingly. "Do you like my island?"

She said, "It's . . . magnificent."

"It wants one thing." Their eyes were locked still. "A mistress."

She looked away.

After a pause he said, "There is something else to show you." But the enthusiasm had gone, his voice was cold. "Over here."

She followed him. It emerged suddenly from the high grass, which had concealed it. It was roughly square, its sides precipitously steep, a hole chiseled out of the rocky core of the island. About 20 feet across, perhaps 15 feet deep on the far side, 25 on this. The walls, like the floor, were granite.

"They got the stone from here," he said, "to build the house. Not long after Waterloo. The man who owned the island was a sea captain, and he had the use of French prisoners. Quite a few died."

Imagining the past she averted her head.

"There is another story—something that happened fifty years later. The owner is said to have been in love with a beautiful girl. He brought her here by a trick, and when she defied him he had his servants put her down there. The story goes that, since she still would not yield, he sent down drugged wine, and when she was senseless he climbed down a rope ladder and violated her. If so, he was a crude and stupid man. Patience would have brought him to a better end. Privation, exposure, the place itself, would have tamed her."

She stared into the barren granite hole. A little rain water had collected in a hollow at one point. She could visualize the degradation of sucking at it, on hands and knees, with a face watching above, with the music of Bach faint on the air.

He said, "The moment I saw you I knew you would crown the island."

She could not look at him. She thought of his patient, hideous resolution. A hillock carved to let him see the dawn while he swam. Bird life

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destroyed to make way for his parakeets. Bach brought up to the island's crest for his pleasure. And so he had seen a woman, and wanted her.

What was it he had said in the train? "Except for one occasion I haven't driven since the war." One occasion. A hunting down, a waiting, and a car driven into a defenseless man on a lonely road . . . And then the slow, sexless wooing of a girl crazed by grief.

She turned to him, smiling, opening her arms. For a moment he was surprised, and then triumphant. He took her in his arms, felt her body melt toward his, and tried to guide her back to the summerhouse.

She shook her head.

"No, here," she whispered. "Here. Now!"

They lay in the grass, a foot or two from the lip of the granite hole. The sun slanted through the tops of the trees.

"Sleep," she crooned. "Be at rest, my darling. Sleep. Sleep."

He was about 25, dark, strong, with a stubble of beard, the local fisherman who had brought oil for the generator.

"Lucky there was plenty of food in the place," he said. "Of course, if you'd known how to handle the boat . . . But better not, I reckon. These are nasty waters for those that don't know them."

She had led him up to the crest and they stood by the edge of the granite hole.

Looking down, he said, "It's a long enough drop to kill anyone. You wouldn't think he would miss his footing, would you, knowing the place so well? But that's how it happens—you get overconfident."

In three weeks the sun had bleached it and rain had rotted it. One could see the white gleam of bone.

"Funny that," he said. "The way he's fallen. He looks as though he's trying to climb out. Well, there's nothing we can do, I reckon."

He looked around, at the waving empty grass, at the silent wood.

"Used to be full of budgies, this place," he said. "Lovebirds, you know. Hundreds of them."

"They're dead."

He looked at her, puzzled. "Dead?"

"It was the falcon," she said. "I could not bear to see him tied, so I cut the tether. He killed them all, all the bright birds."

Suddenly, uncontrollably, she began to weep. Sobbing she turned her face up toward the sky's bright blue. High up, almost invisible, the patient falcon hung, waiting.

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Jack, babysitting his three-year-old son Tim, ran out of cigarettes. Surely it would be safe to go to the nearest store to buy a fresh pack, taking his little boy with him. But what then happened to Jack—could it have also happened to you? In any city in the United States? In any city in the world? And if it could have happened to you, how would you have handled the clear and present danger, the dreadful peril?

A LITTLE RIDE IN THE CAR

by E. E. ROBERTS

It all started out so innocently. I'd run out of cigarettes too early in the evening. Ordinarily I'd have brought a supply home, but I'd promised my wife I'd quit after this pack. Tonight, though, she was out—at her bridge club—and not expected back before midnight. As a result I was stuck home babysitting our three-year-old, and I'd soon be climbing the walls without a smoke.

A promise was a promise, of course, but I told myself as long as I quit it didn't really matter if it was with this pack or the next. So with that as a sop to my conscience I called Tim.

"Get your jacket," I said when he looked up curiously from his play. "We're going for a little ride in the car." Then as a further sop to my conscience, I added, "We'll get you an ice-cream cone while we're at it."

At that Tim's face turned into a sunbeam and he scampered for his jacket.

It was already starting to get dark when we left the house. But the days were shortening now with the onset of fall, and it was actually only a little past seven. And since it was Friday, the supermarket would still be open for another two hours. But the closest place was Stewart's, a couple of blocks down. And since tonight I was more interested in saving time than money that's where I headed.

I parked in the small unlighted lot out back, got Tim unstrapped from his safety seat, and held his hand loosely in mine as we went into the store.

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As luck would have it, old Eddie Stewart himself was manning the counter.

"Well, well, well," he said good-naturedly. "Look who's shopping in my store." He was a tall white-maned man with a pleasantly ruddy face which hadn't changed noticeably in the 30 years he'd had a store on this corner. Now he leaned down over the counter to grin at Tim. "What did you do, son?" he said. "Tell your dad you wanted to see the inside of a good old-fashioned store for once?"

Tim eyed him dubiously, then grinned back.

Stewart ruffled Tim's hair and straightened up. "What can I do for you, Jack?" he said.

"Just a pack of cigarettes," I said.

He pulled one out of the display dispenser, handed it to me, and accepted the change I gave him in return. "And for you, young man?" he said to Tim.

"Ice-cream cone," Tim said promptly.

Stewart pulled an exaggeratedly solemn face. "I'm afraid I don't stock ice-cream cones," he said. "How about some nice peppermint candy or—"

Tim looked up at me pleadingly. "Ice-cream cone?"

I laughed. "All right," I said. "We'll go to another store and get you an ice-cream cone." I glanced slyly at Stewart. "Apparently your old-fashioned store isn't as good as you thought."

Stewart shrugged. "Can't please everybody," he said equably. "You ought to know that."

I laughed again and Tim and I left. It was darker out now and beginning to turn chilly.

I was just straightening up from strapping Tim in when it happened. An arm looped around my neck, pulling me back off balance. At the same time something hard—a gun—jabbed into the small of my back.

I froze for one panicky moment. Then the moment passed and I found my voice. "The wallet's in my hip pocket," I said carefully. "Take it and no trouble."

"No trouble is right, pal," a gruff voice said in my ear. The gun remained firm in my back but the arm left my neck and slipped down to pluck the car keys from my half-raised hand and flip them over the top of the car. Another man stepped swiftly out of the shadows to catch them. Then, moving with almost military precision, the other man unlocked both doors on that side and slipped in the rear beside Tim.

The man with the gun

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nudged me. "Now you," he said. "In behind the wheel."

I did as I was told, moving slowly with exaggerated care. I was afraid as I'd never been afraid before and I wasn't going to risk any quick movements.

The man outside slammed the door after me. As he did, the man in the rear leaned forward to point a gun squarely at my head along the top edge of the seat.

Tim pointed excitedly. "Daddy," he cried. "Look at that!" He wasn't the least bit frightened because in all his three years he'd never seen a gun. Or met an adult who meant him harm.

The man who had grabbed me slid in beside me. He showed his teeth in a wolfish grin that split his flat high-cheeked face. "See, Daddy," he said. "Just like I said—no trouble."

I found myself flushing under the open contempt in his voice. He saw it and his smile broadened. Without taking his eyes from me he held out his free hand for the car keys. The man in back passed them forward and the one in front stuck them in the ignition lock.

"Okay," he said. "Now let's go for a little ride."

I wet my lips. "Where to?" I said.

"Just drive," he said harshly. "We'll get around to where later."

I started the motor and pulled out of the lot.

"It's 7:30, Arnie," the man in back said. "There ought to be some news on now."

Arnie reached out to switch on the radio. Music blared and he flicked from station to station until he picked up a newscast. We sat silently through the remainder of the national and international reports, two commercials, and then:

"In late-breaking local news," the announcer's voice said, "police are still searching for two men who killed a guard and escaped from city jail where they were being held pending remand to Federal custody in connection with a bank robbery in Kansas City last month."

"That's us, Arnie," the man in back said excitedly. He was bigger than Arnie, with hair that came low on his forehead and small glittering eyes set in a beefy face.

Arnie shushed him with a quick movement of his hand.

"According to Chief of Police James Vector," the radio voice went on, "the two men—Arnold Sangster and Albert 'Mick' Mickelson—are believed to be still within the city limits. Roadblocks on all arteries lead-

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ing out of town and watches at train, bus, and air terminals have been established to prevent their escape. Both are known to be armed and should be considered extremely dangerous. Descriptions of the two—"

Arnie clicked off the radio.

Mickelson breathed hard. "Roadblocks. Watches at the stations."

"What did you expect?" Arnie snapped. "A free pass out of town?" He settled back against the seat. "But don't worry. We'll beat them yet." He grinned at me. "Won't we, Daddy?"

I didn't reply.

"What's the matter, Daddy," he said. "You worried to be traveling around with us 'extremely dangerous' men?"

"Look—" I began.

Behind me Timmy started to sniffle. Arnie frowned. "Shut the kid up," he said, "if you know what's good for him."

"Timmy," I said in near desperation, "for God's sake, don't cry."

Tim sniffled louder. "Ice-cream cone," he said. "You promised."

Mickelson laughed out loud. Arnie's mouth curled mockingly. "Shame on you, Daddy," he said. "Breaking a promise to your own kid."

"Look," I said, "all you need is the car for transportation. Take the car and let us go."

"Sure," Arnie said contemptuously, "and have you calling the cops before we're halfway around the next corner. Not a chance, Daddy."

It would do no good to promise that I wouldn't call the police. Only a fool would believe that a promise made under duress would be kept.

"At least," I said, "let the boy go. He can't do anything to hurt you."

"What?" Arnie said in a tone of mock horror. "Turn your own little boy loose on the street where he might get hit by a car?"

He'd be safer there, I thought. But I said. "No, in a store. He knows his name and address. They'd see he was lost and get him home all right."

Arnie looked at me considerингly, then his eyes flicked to the road ahead.

"Pull over to the curb here, Daddy," he said.

I felt relief wash over me. At least Tim would be out of it. I braked to a stop.

"I'll just—" I began, putting the car out of gear and half turning toward Tim.

"You'll just nothing, Daddy," Arnie said flatly. "Mick, there's a candy store." He jerked his head back to indicate

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the store across the sidewalk. "Go in and get the kid the ice-cream cone he wants."

I stared at Arnie, not sure I'd heard him right.

Mick wasn't too sure either. "What?" he said. "You kidding or something?"

Arnie didn't say anything; he just held his face set and grim. After a second or two Mick shrugged, stuck his pistol under his coat, got out of the car, and lumbered across the sidewalk.

"There's a couple of things you'd better get clear in your head, Daddy," Arnie said in a low intense voice. "First of all, that guard we killed was a cop of sorts. And cops don't like it when one of their own gets it. So right now they're turning this city upside down looking for me and Mick.

"The thing is, though, they're looking for two guys. Three guys and a kid—especially a kid with an ice-cream cone—now that's something else again. In any case nobody gets off this merry-go-round until I say the ride's over. And until then, you do just what you're told—no questions, no comments, no suggestions. Or—" He nodded with heavy meaning toward Tim and made an explosive noise with his mouth. "Get the message?" he said.

"And when the ride's over?" I said.

"I said no questions, Daddy," Arnie said viciously. The gun jumped forward to rake hard against my shoulder. I cried out involuntarily. Timmy began to whimper in earnest now. I looked into Arnie's face and saw that it wouldn't take much to push him over the edge into senseless violence. I found myself holding my breath.

Just as I thought things couldn't go on, Mick lumbered back to the car, an ice-cream cone engulfed in one huge paw. One look at the cone resolved all Timmy's fears. He reached out and took it as Mick settled on the seat beside him.

"Thank you," Timmy said between licks.

Arnie's face lightened. " 'Thank you,' " he mimicked. "Now isn't that a polite kid for you?" He looked back at me. His eyes still glinted but they were no longer dangerous. "No, Daddy," he said, "you don't have to say thank you. Just say you got the message."

"Got the message," I said.

Arnie smiled and waved his free hand airily. "Let's drive."

I put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb.

We drove around for an hour or so with Arnie giving seemingly aimless directions. It soon became apparent, though, that what he was actually doing was testing out the town's defenses.

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And sadistically enjoying watching me sweat.

Once, while we stopped for a red light, a patrol car pulled up beside us. Mick sucked in his breath sharply, but Arnie continued to loll, smiling, on the seat beside me. As we waited, the nearest cop turned his head and looked at us. I felt moisture beading my forehead and filming my palms. But his glance swept on past, casually, without curiosity. Then the light changed and the prowl car pulled swiftly ahead and away.

"Bad moment, huh, Daddy?" Arnie mocked. "You shouldn't have let it worry you, though. It's like I told you. They're looking for two men—not three men and a kid. And everything's going to work out just fine. Just fine."

Still, he wasn't willing to put his theory to the test. Because each time we approached one of the exits from town and it became apparent that something was stopping traffic up ahead, he ordered a quick turnoff and reversal of route.

Finally Mick said, "We aren't getting anywhere, Arnie." There was more than a trace of irritation in his voice.

Arnie growled back at him. "You get a better idea then? The local man wants a thousand bucks apiece for a safe ride out of town. In advance. Which we can't pay because we ain't got it. So what would you do if you were in charge? Huh?"

Mick lapsed into sullen silence.

I let the car go half a block. Then I cleared my throat. "If you need money—" I began.

Arnie rounded on me savagely. "You got money, huh, Daddy?" he said.

I cleared my throat again. "No," I said. "But I know where we can get some."

Arnie stared at me with such hostility that I began to think I'd made a mistake. Then his face became calculating. "We?" he said.

I nodded. "If I take you to the money," I said, "I want a share."

No one said anything for a long moment. Then Mick breathed, "Well, what do you know?"

Arnie came out of his reverie with a visible snap. "Yeah," he said. "What do you know?" He grinned his wolfish grin. "I'm surprised at you, Daddy," he said. "What kind of example is that for the kid here?"

"You let me worry about that," I said shortly. "Is it a deal or not?"

"You ain't in any position to make deals," Mick said harshly.

Arnie waved his fingers to shush him just as he had earlier. "All right, Daddy," he said.

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"It's a deal. Now what's the set-up?"

I swallowed hard and concentrated on my driving so they wouldn't guess my thoughts. "A supermarket," I said.

"They're closed, Daddy," Arnie said.

"True," I said. It was a little after nine by now. The markets were just closing, the last shoppers being hurried through the checkout lines. In another thirty minutes the tallying and cleaning up would be over and the staffs would be leaving. "But there's still money in them." I took a deep breath and hurried on, "The big employer in my part of town is a furniture factory. Maybe half the people in the neighborhood work for it. And it pays, today, Friday. But a lot of people—especially those on the late shifts—wait until tomorrow to cash their checks. And most of them do it at the supermarkets because the banks aren't open on Saturdays. So the markets have to hold three, maybe four thousand in their safes overnight."

"Sure," Arnie said scornfully. "And they got security guards to watch over them too."

"I know one that hasn't," I said. "It's an independent and the owner has to cut corners to compete with the chains."

They were both silent for a moment. Then Mick said, "What do you think, Arnie?"

Arnie bit his lip, then shrugged. "It's worth a try," he said. "Besides—" his eyes glinted at me—"Daddy here knows what will happen if anything goes wrong. Don't you, Daddy?"

"Yes," I said.

It was too early to try the store, Arnie said, even though the last of the staff would be gone before we got there and it was now full dark. "Still too much traffic on the streets," he explained. "We don't make our move until things start to wind down. Around twelve thirty or one o'clock. That's the time."

12:30. My wife would be home by then and worrying about where Timmy and I had gone. I was pretty sure what her first reaction would be. She'd check the neighbors, then the emergency room at the hospital. But what would she do after that? Call the police?

Perhaps, I decided, but only to see if they knew anything about an accident or other emergency—not to start a full-scale search. Anyway, I hoped not. The last thing I wanted was a patrol car swooping down on us.

It probably wouldn't have mattered even if she had, though. Because Arnie decided that cruising the streets was too

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risky now, and we spent the time parked at the dark end of a little-used side street.

Tim promptly fell asleep. So did Mick, his snores regularly punctuating the quiet. Arnie and I remained awake and warily conscious of each other's nearness although I made it a point not to look at him. I had expected more mockery, but the only time he spoke was when he told me it was time to go.

It was a little after 1:00 when we turned into the shopping-center parking lot. Arnie was right about things winding down. The streets were deserted except for an occasional late-nighter scurrying home. The lot itself gleamed empty and desolate in the half light of the few lamps left on.

Without waiting to be told I cut onto the delivery road that ran along the back of the store buildings. It was almost pitch-black here and Arnie nodded approvingly. I stopped at the big building at the far end and cut the motor. A single bulb illuminated a sign over the door opposite us: "Hanson's Market. Delivery Entrance."

Arnie climbed out of the car. "Both of you stay here," he said, "while I case the joint."

He disappeared into the dark. Mick stirred uneasily. That and Tim's regular breathing were the only sounds.

A few moments later Arnie was back. "All right," he said. "I found a window I think we can get in without setting off any bells."

Mick got out and went around the car to where Arnie was standing. I made no move to join them. Arnie grinned wickedly and opened my door from outside.

"No free rides, Daddy," he said. "You want your share, you get your hands dirty like the rest of us."

Mick looked at me impassively. I got out of the car.

Arnie kept his hand on the door handle. "Mick," he said, "you stay here."

Mick started to protest, but Arnie cut him off impatiently. "Use your head," he said. "Somebody's got to be lookout. I don't trust Daddy and you can't open the safe. I can."

Mick hesitated, then shrugged and got back in the car, this time in the driver's seat. Arnie slammed the door after him, then made an expansive gesture to me with his hand. "Let's go, Daddy," he said.

In his other hand he held an unlit flashlight he'd taken from my glove compartment. His gun was tucked snugly in the waistband of his trousers. He grinned again when he caught me looking at it. I kept my face

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impassive and walked toward the building. He waited until I'd gotten a short lead, then followed me.

There was no mistaking the window he meant. It was in the back wall about chest high. I stopped and let Arnie come up beside me.

"Take off your coat," he said, "and hold it over the glass."

I looked at him curiously, but shrugged out of my jacket.

Arnie swung the flashlight viciously against the coat on the window. The glass shattered under the impact and tinkled inward.

I dropped my arms and stepped back. Still using the flashlight as a club, Arnie cleared away the last shards of glass clinging to the edges. Then he motioned me in. "After you, Daddy," he said. "And be well away from the window when I come through."

I grasped the edges of the sill and heaved myself through. Inside, I paused beside the window to get my bearings, then went to stand with my back against the opposite wall.

Arnie flicked on the flashlight and shined it through the window just long enough to pick me out. Satisfied I was where he wanted me, he scrambled through himself.

The gun was out of his waistband and in his hand almost as soon as his feet touched the floor. He looked around swiftly, then his teeth flashed in his old mocking smile. "You lead the way, Daddy," he said.

Then and only then did I push myself away from the wall. "The office is up front," I said. "The safe will be there."

After we'd gotten a few yards away from the smashed window, Arnie switched on the flashlight again and we made our way through the darkened aisles.

The "office" was a roofless semi-enclosed space set at one end of the line of checkout counters and rising slightly above them. It was spartanly furnished with a paper-strewn desk, two chairs, and a squat metal floor safe. Arnie let the flashlight beam play over the face of the safe.

"The owner didn't cut corners on that," he said.

I leaned against the edge of the desk. "What's the matter?" I said. "Can't you open this kind?"

He glanced up sharply. "There isn't a tinbox supermarket safe anywhere I can't open," he said. He thrust the flashlight at me. "Take this and hold it so I can see what I'm doing."

I took the light and shined it

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on the combination dial. Arnie made me move it once, then knelt in front of the safe. He swirled the dial, keeping one ear close to it. His other hand—the one holding the gun—rested lightly on the safe. After a minute or two he grinned and tugged at the safe handle.

It didn't move. He muttered something under his breath, laid the gun down on top of the safe, and went to work with both hands. This time his movements were slow and deliberate. And his face was fierce in its concentration. I felt the flashlight grow slippery and shifted it from hand to hand to wipe the sweat from my palms.

"Hold that light steady," Arnie snapped without looking up.

I steadied the light. Arnie concentrated on the dial. Finally he took his hand away, paused long enough for one deep breath, then reached out for the handle again. This time it turned easily.

He gave me a triumphant grin and pulled the door open. The grin turned into a long low whistle at what he saw inside. "Look at that lovely—"

I swung the flashlight.

The sudden shift of light warned him and he dodged instinctively. But I still caught him a hard glancing blow that sent him off balance and crashing against the partition. He had his feet back under him again in a second and was crouched ready to spring. But by then I had the gun.

I beamed the light full in his face. "Cool it, Arnie," I said. "The odds are on my side now."

For one long moment his face held that wild look and I was afraid he was going to lunge at me. Then suddenly he slacked against the wall. "All right, Daddy," he said. "You win this round."

I marched him back through the store to the meat cooler. He got his composure back quickly and started riding me again, hoping to egg me into making a mistake. But as soon as he saw where I'd brought him, he stopped short.

"Hey," he exclaimed, "I'll freeze!"

I didn't give his reaction any time to harden. I shoved against his back and sent him stumbling inside. Moving swiftly before he could recover his balance, I slammed the door and locked it. A moment later I could hear a faint pounding through its thickness.

I smiled grimly. "That's fine, Arnie," I said. "Now you know how it feels."

I hurried back through the store, picked up a shopping bag at one of the counters, and

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went into the office again. The safe door was still open and just as Arnie had left it. Kneeling quickly, I scooped the money out into the bag. A couple of bills missed and fluttered onto the floor. I left them there and stuffed the full bag out of sight under the desk.

Leaving the office door open, I started back toward the broken window where Arnie and I had entered. Halfway there I remembered something and came back to unlatch the front door from the inside and push it open. That set an alarm bell jangling at police headquarters. But it would take the police four or five minutes to get here. And four or five minutes were all I needed—I hoped.

Mick straightened behind the wheel and looked at me suspiciously as I trotted panting up to the car.

"Where's Arnie?" I said before he could speak.

Mick's forehead creased in a frown. It made his small eyes smaller. "What do you mean where's Arnie?" he said.

I looked around. "Didn't he come back?" I said, trying to sound bewildered. "He was having trouble opening the safe, so he sent me to look for a crowbar. I couldn't find one, but when I went back to tell him, the safe was open and he was gone. I figured he must have come back here to the car."

Mick's eyes glittered. He climbed out of the car and gripped my arm hard. "What are you trying to pull?" he said.

"I'm not trying to pull anything," I protested. "If you don't believe me, come see for yourself."

I half turned and pulled in the direction of the store. After a second Mick released his grip and followed me.

We went through the window the same way Arnie and I had—me first and Mick following. Inside, he resumed his grip on my arm and hustled me through the store. He let go when he saw the open front door and the empty safe with the scattering of bills on the floor.

"The no-good—" Mick said. "He skipped out on me just as soon as he had his hands on the dough."

Just then the first of the police cars swerved onto the lot, closely followed by a second.

"Cops!" Mick yelled and started to run. I tripped him.

After that things got hectic. There seemed to be cops all over the place and they were more inclined to act than to listen. Finally I got enough of

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my story out to convince them I wasn't a thief and they let me sit on one of the checkout counters and tell the rest. When I was finished, two of them went back to get Arnie out while a third went with me to pick up Tim.

He was still sleeping. I unstrapped him from his seat and picked him up without waking him.

"He okay?" the cop said. Finding Tim where I'd said he'd be had been the clincher. He believed me now.

"Yes," I said. "He's fine, thank God."

"How about you?"

I smiled wryly. "A little shaken up."

"You were lucky," the cop said.

I nodded and we went back around the store and in the front. Both Arnie and Mick stood in front of a checkout counter, looking smaller and seedier now that their hands were cuffed behind their backs. One of the cops flanking them was speaking into a walkie-talkie. Arnie glared at me.

"The merry-go-round ride's over, Arnie," I said. "And it looks like you were the one thrown off."

"Maybe," Arnie said. His eyes glinted. "But don't think you have the brass ring yet, Daddy." He turned to the cop beside me. "I don't know what kind of a cock-and-bull story he told you," he said, "but Daddy here's in this thing just as deep as we are. As a matter of fact, it was his idea from the start and the whole hero bit is just a gimmick to grab all the loot for himself.

"If you don't believe me," he went on, jerking his head in the direction of the office, "just ask him what happened to all the money that was in that safe when I opened it."

It was easy to see what he meant. The store lights had been turned on and the empty safe was clearly visible through the open office doorway. So were the few bills I'd left on the floor.

The cop's eyes had gone quietly speculative. "How about it, mister?" he said.

I smiled. "It's true," I said. "I brought them here and I emptied the safe." I paused and let the smile turn into a grin. "But I don't think you can charge me with stealing. You see, this is my store—I'm Jack Hanson."

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the *NEWEST* Rand investigation by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Number 20 in the series about Rand, the Double-C man . . . (Will we ever know more about Rand's personal life and background? What is his first name? Which schools did he go to? Does he have a girl friend or a fiancee? Is it possible he is married? What are his hobbies? What does he plan to do after he retires from the Department of Concealed Communications?) . . . Actually, the case was a bit out of Rand's line, but then Rand was a born troubleshooter—or should we say, tripleshooter?—a code-and-cipher expert, a counterespionage agent, and more and more as the series progresses, a detective . . .

THE SPY WITHOUT A COUNTRY

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It had been raining for three days in London, and Rand was sick of it. He was dreaming of a weekend on the French Riviera when an unexpected visitor arrived at his office overlooking the Thames. He hadn't laid eyes on Walter Effing since they'd been in first form together at King's School in Tercanbury, and seeing him now Rand was struck by how very little the man had changed in 28 years. His face still wore the expression of a small boy about to whisper a secret, and his tousled brown hair showed none of Rand's own middle-aged gray.

"How are you, Walter?" he asked, rising to shake hands. "It's been a good many years."

"That it has," Effing agreed, glancing around at the crowded office. "How've you been doing, Rand?"

"Quite well, thanks, but don't judge by this place. The Director of Concealed Communications spends very little time behind a desk. We have a number of rooms around back, including a large message room where most of the actual

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decoding is accomplished."

"Is it true women are better at that sort of thing than men?"

Rand nodded. "They have more patience for some types of trial-and-error cipher work, though most of our staff are still male."

Effing gave the office another look. "Yes. Well. Frankly, Rand, I was expecting something a bit more—er, impressive—with your position and all that."

No, Rand decided, Effing hadn't changed a bit in those 28 years. "Just what can I do for you, Walter?"

The brown-haired man licked his lips, suddenly at a loss for words. Finally they came out, in something of a torrent. "It's about my wife, actually. Glenda. You must remember Glenda, surely? She was Glenda Fairbright before our marriage. Very fine family."

Rand wondered at the point of it all. Something had brought Walter Effing back into his life after all this time, but he still couldn't imagine what. "I remember her," he admitted.

"We, the family and I, have kept it out of the London papers thus far, but I'm afraid Glenda is in a spot of trouble across the Channel."

"In France?"

Effing nodded. "She was over there on a buying trip for the gallery. Last week a man tried to attack her while she was inspecting an old country house, and she killed him. It was self-defense, but a terrible experience for her, nevertheless."

"But how can I help?"

"The case is still in the courts. There has to be a hearing later this week—something like a coroner's inquest in this country. Well, yesterday in Paris I received a visit from a most despicable man named Guy Canday. He claims to possess a handwritten letter from my wife to the man she killed, a letter that seems to indicate the two were close friends. You can understand the position this places Glenda in! If this man reveals his damning letter to the French authorities, a simple case of justifiable homicide could become an overnight sensation—what they call a *cause celebre*, I believe. And Glenda might even be tried for murder."

"Mr. Canday wants money for his document?"

"Of course! He's nothing but a common blackmailer."

Rand nodded. "It's not unlike a short story and play by Somerset Maugham. *The Letter.*"

"How did that come out?"

"I suppose you might say it

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had a happy ending, of sorts. Do you believe the letter to be a forgery?"

"I wanted your opinion on that, Rand. I was at my wit's end last evening until I remembered your connection with Double-C."

"But why Double-C?"

"The man she killed was a Frenchman named Georges Leleu. The papers say he was a spy for the Germans during the final months of World War Two. He was recently released from prison after serving twenty-three years of a life sentence for murder."

Rand's memory stirred. "I seem to remember the case. How could your wife be connected with someone like that?"

"I don't know, Rand. I just don't know. That's why I've come to you. Here's a copy of the letter my wife supposedly sent to the man she killed."

Rand took it and read: "*Georges: I believe I have found the house you are seeking. It's on the Melun road, just south of the airport there. A large white place with formal gardens in the front. Meet me there Tuesday at noon. Love, Glenda.*"

"What do you make of it, Rand?"

He shrugged. "Seems straightforward enough. No obvious code. I assume this is your wife's handwriting?"

"Yes."

"You think they were having an affair?"

"Frankly, Rand, I don't know what to think. I can't even bring myself to show this to Glenda."

"She's here in London with you?"

"No, in Paris. She has to wait for the hearing into Leleu's death."

"Just what do you want me to do?"

"Talk to her, get to the bottom of this thing! I'm frantic, Rand."

"Will you pay the blackmail?"

Effing sighed and looked at his hands. Very quietly he answered, "If there's no other way, yes."

"You must love your wife very much."

"I do."

"All right," Rand decided. "I'll talk to her, but I can't promise anything. This is a bit out of my line."

"Thank you, Rand. I knew I could count on an old school chum."

Rand saw him to the door and then went back to his desk. He was not helping Effing because he'd been a classmate 28 years ago. There was something else about the case

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that interested him enough to take him to Paris. And that was the question: Why was an aging spy like Georges Leleu looking for a certain house, on the Melun road outside Paris?

He dialed Hastings' extension, and when he heard the familiar voice he said, "Hastings, I need some information on a former German agent named Georges Leleu. He recently finished serving a prison sentence, and he was killed last week near Paris. Do your computers have anything on him?"

"I'll see, old man." Hastings was gone from the phone for a few minutes, but when he returned he had the information. "Georges Leleu, age fifty-one, born in France but served as a German agent during 1943 and '44. Arrested and questioned by U.S. Military Intelligence late in '44. While in custody he killed a guard and attempted to escape. He was tried by French authorities and sentenced to life in prison. Served twenty-three years before being released a year or so back."

"Any record of his movements since release?"

"None, except he was believed to be in France. We don't keep tabs on people like that after all this time. The war's been over for twenty-five years. The Nazi Germany he served vanished long ago. He's a spy without a country, and those are the kind we don't worry about."

"I wonder."

"What?"

"I wonder if we should have worried about him. Somebody killed him last week and I don't know why."

"Things are slow here," Hastings said. "Maybe you should look into it."

"That's just what I'm going to do."

Glenda Effing was a tall handsome woman who wore a tweed suit and gave off the vague impression of being an actress between engagements. Rand had never really known her as a child, though the Fairbright family was an old one in the Tercanbury area. She was, in the language of the time, a liberated woman, and he wondered what quirk of life had caused her to marry someone like Walter Effing.

"Always pleased to meet one of Walter's old school chums," she said, extending a hand. They were in her hotel room in Paris, overlooking a little park where the first green touches of spring were beginning to dot the trees. "But he never mentioned you before."

"Rand is with the British

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government, my dear," Effing explained. "He's head of Concealed Communications—codes and all that."

"Oh?"

"He's come over to help you. To help us."

"I don't really need any help, Walter. I have a very straightforward story."

"Just what did happen?" Rand asked her.

She crossed her legs, showing a good bit of firm thigh, and answered, "I'm a buyer of antiques for the Crown Galleries in London. They send me over here whenever they're offered something—to check it out, make certain it's not a fake."

"I suppose there are a great many forgeries in that business," Rand observed.

"Indeed, especially in furniture. Although occasionally you'll come upon a fake that's worth as much as an original. The young Michelangelo earned early fame by faking a classic Roman sculpture called *Cupid Asleep.* He even buried it and arranged for it to be found and identified as an ancient work."

"Were there any fakes in the house near Melun?"

"No, the collection is quite good. I've urged my London people to make an offer. The place is a fine old country house, but not quite fine enough or old enough to be saved from airport expansion."

"You went alone to the house?"

"My first visit was with the owner, a Swiss banker named Claque, but I was alone the day it happened. There's a sort of caretaker-gardener fellow who let me in, but then he went off somewhere. Anyway, I was looking through some of the rooms on the main floor when I heard a sound like a window opening. This man Leleu suddenly appeared with a gun."

"What sort of gun?"

"Oh, I don't know—a revolver of some sort. He grabbed me; we struggled, and the gun went off."

"As simple as that."

"Yes," she said, very quietly.

"Did he say anything at all to you?"

"I think he cursed me. In French."

"And you had the idea he was trying to assault you?"

"Why else would he have grabbed me like that?"

Rand glanced at Walter Effing. "Could you leave us alone for a few minutes, Walter?"

"Certainly. I'll be outside."

Alone with her, Rand studied this woman he'd come to help. The close-fitting jacket of her tweed suit showed off a small waist and accentuated the

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thrust of her breasts. She must have been nearly his own age, but there was a vibrant youthfulness about her that seemed to counter the business-like chill that was one's first impression. Perhaps this woman could have taken a lover, even one as old as Georges Leleu.

"I don't believe you're being truthful," he told her. "Your husband came to me with a copy of a letter."

"Letter? What letter?"

Rand passed the copy across to her. "I think you'll recognize it."

Her eyes scanned the paper quickly. "You think I wrote this?"

"The original, in your handwriting, is in the possession of a blackmailer named Canday."

"I know nothing about it," she said firmly.

"Mrs. Effing, the man you killed in that country house—the man to whom this letter was apparently addressed—was a former German secret agent named Georges Leleu. He'd been in a French prison for murder since the end of the war."

"I only know what I read in the newspapers."

"You're making it hard on yourself, Mrs. Effing. If this letter is genuine, you're in trouble."

She stood up suddenly, signaling an end to the conversation. "Mr. Rand, I've been in and out of trouble since the day I was born. This is no different."

"All right," he told her. He walked to the door and called Effing. There was no arguing with a stubborn woman.

The following morning Rand drove out to the white house on the Melun road with Claque, the Swiss banker whose firm had acquired the place in a complex tangle of estate transactions. "You understand it's just a piece of property to us, Mr. Rand," the banker explained, "but nonetheless I'm personally sorry to see it go. It's a beautiful old house, with quite a history."

Rand, intent on the lushness of the passing landscape, roused himself to ask, "What sort of history?"

"It was built during the final days of the Second Empire, around 1870, and at one time was the country home of a wealthy government official. Part of the house was damaged by a shell from a German Big Bertha in 1918, and after the liberation of Paris in 1944 the place served as an Allied intelligence command post. The small airport next door made it ideal for that purpose. Most

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recently, a member of the Chamber of Deputies has resided there. Now he is dead, and we have the sad task of seeing the place dismantled to make room for a longer airplane runway."

The house itself came into view then, as if on cue. It was a large rambling place, with a garden of carefully clipped hedges and yew trees in the front. He could almost imagine horse-drawn carriages moving up its long curving driveway to discharge their passengers for formal state dinners in some long-ago era. But somehow, despite the rows of stately poplar trees that flanked the house like sentinels, the structure itself was basically ugly, like some reject from a travel brochure. Rand understood why there had been no uproar about preserving it.

As the car pulled to a stop, a large bearded man appeared from around the corner, carrying a coil of garden hose. "That's our custodian and gardener. I'll introduce you," Claque said.

The man came forward to greet them, and Rand noticed he walked with a slight limp. He glanced casually at Rand, but addressed himself to Claque. "All quiet here, sir. No trouble." His accent was decidedly British.

"Good, good! Mr. Rand, this is our caretaker, Guy Canday."

Rand shook the meaty hand without a flicker of surprise. He hadn't expected to encounter the blackmailing Mr. Canday quite so soon, but perhaps the meeting was all to the good. "I understand the house has a long history," he said.

The bearded man nodded. "Let me show you around."

Rand followed Canday and Claque inside, marveling at the high ornate ceilings and polished hardwood floors. "The furnishings have all been removed," Rand said, stating the obvious. "I understood that Glenda Effing came here to inspect some antiques."

Canday seemed to stiffen slightly at her name.

"We placed everything in storage after the murder," Claque explained. "That sort of news attracts too many curiosity-seekers. And the place will be torn down soon anyway."

At one spot near the windows the wood was beginning to rot, and here and there a strip of peeling paint hung from the walls. The house was slowly dying, and its final days were at hand.

"The furnishings were the original ones?" Rand asked Claque.

"In many cases, yes. I recently had Canday supervise

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the cleaning and restoration of several pieces, in preparation for their sale."

"In which room did Glenda Effing kill the man?"

The bearded Canday motioned toward the door. "Across the hall, in the dining room. I was outside when I heard the shot. I came running and found her standing over him."

"You know Mrs. Effing?"

"I only saw her the two times she was here."

"And the dead man?"

"Leleu. He was staying at a hotel in Orly. I know nothing else about him, though the papers say he was once a German spy."

"You fought in the war?" Rand asked.

Guy Canday motioned toward his leg. "I got this parachuting into France on D-Day."

Rand nodded. "Had Leleu ever been here before, to your knowledge?"

"I never saw him around."

"And do you believe Glenda Effing's story of what happened?"

Canday shrugged. "No reason to doubt it."

Rand looked around a bit more, strolling through empty, echoing rooms, trying to see them as Glenda Effing had. Finally he gave it up and departed with Claque, driving back to Paris through the spring sunshine.

Walter Effing was waiting at Rand's hotel. "I've been looking for you," he said, obviously agitated. "That man Canday phoned me. He wants ten thousand pounds—ten thousand!—or he'll turn the letter over to the French authorities. And he wants the money by tonight."

"I met Canday this morning."

"You what?"

"I met him. Claque employs him as a caretaker at the house. Where are you supposed to meet him?"

"There—at the house. Nine o'clock."

"Good," Rand said. "I'll go in your place, if you don't mind, Walter."

"I haven't the money—not that sort of money."

"With some luck, perhaps we won't need it."

The countryside by night was a strangely different place, with the morning's familiar landmarks now blended into shadows. Rand drove to the country house in a rented car which he parked down the road. He went the rest of the way on foot, feeling the reassuring presence of the automatic beneath his arm. He

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rarely felt the need to carry a gun, but tonight was different. He'd never been a believer in the axiom that blackmailers don't shoot.

He found the front door of the big white house unlocked and entered quietly, moving through the darkened rooms on a route he remembered from his morning visit. The glowing hands of his wrist watch told him it was just nine o'clock. Then there was a sudden sound on the stairs behind him. He turned quickly, feeling for his gun.

"Is that you, Effing?" Guy Canday's voice asked.

"Yes," Rand replied in a hoarse whisper.

"Do you have the money?"

"Let's see the letter first. The original."

There was a click as a small portable spotlight was turned on him. He heard Canday curse with recognition and immediately snap off the light. But Rand had already moved. He bounded up the stairs with arms outstretched, catching the big man around the legs. They both tumbled the few steps to the floor. When they stopped falling, Rand was on top. He drew his gun.

"Don't!" the man gasped. "Don't shoot!"

Rand got to his feet and located the spotlight, switching it on while he kept Canday covered. "On your feet."

"I'm not armed, damn it! Put away that gun!"

"Is the electricity still on in this place?"

"Yes."

Rand located a wall switch and turned on the overhead lights. The bearded man stirred and tried to rise, his eyes wide and frightened. "Did that bloody Effing send you?"

"He sent me for the letter. Suppose you hand it over."

"That won't save her. She killed him in cold blood!"

"Hand over the letter," Rand ordered.

The bearded man reached into his pocket. The paper he produced was pale blue, written with black ink. Rand read over the few lines. "How did you get this?" he asked.

"After her first visit she wrote the letter and asked me to deliver it to him at his hotel in Orly. After she killed him I remembered it. I got to his room before the police and found it there. I figured it would be worth money to me."

"Did you know Leleu was a spy then?"

"Not till I read it in the papers. Honest, I don't know anything about this—but I do know she killed him, after she wrote him to meet her here."

Rand pocketed the letter.

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"All right. I'll see you later."

"What about my money?" Canday demanded.

"Be thankful I don't have you arrested for blackmail."

"You going to let the woman get away with it?"

"I'll tend to her," Rand said.

He left the house and went back to where he'd parked the car. Something was beginning to take shape in his mind, something that had its roots far in the past. He drove back to Paris, to the apartment on Rue Ronge where Claque, the Swiss banker, lived.

"It is late," the banker said, eyeing him suspiciously at the door. "I was about to retire for the night."

"One more favor. Could you give me permission to view the furnishings that were removed from that house during the past week?"

"They are in a warehouse," Claque grumbled. "It is closed now."

"Then in the morning?"

The banker sighed. "Oh, very well. I will telephone them that you are coming."

Rand went back to his room and dropped into sleep almost at once. Somewhere during the night he dreamed it was wartime again, and he was flying in a bomber over enemy territory. When he awoke he was bathed in a chill sweat. . . .

The warehouse was a thing of massive Gothic beauty that only a Frenchman with a little German blood in him could have conceived. Rand wandered up and down aisles piled high with dusty treasures from the past—ornate candlesticks, gilded headboards, crystal chandeliers. Finally he came upon the lot he sought and spent the remainder of the morning searching. He looked in drawers, and under them, prowled over every sort of table and chair and sofa, even unrolled large Oriental rugs for careful inspection.

At the end of the morning he stood back and sighed with disappointment. He didn't really know what he was looking for, but he knew he hadn't found it.

"Perhaps I could be of assistance," a voice behind him suggested in a strong French accent.

Rand turned and saw a little bald Frenchman standing in the aisle watching him. "No, thanks. I'm just about finished."

The newcomer smiled. "You would be Mr. Rand, from England?"

"I'm at a disadvantage. I don't know you."

"Flaubert is the name."

"The author?" Rand asked with a grin.

"No, the detective."

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"Oh?"

"Inspector Flaubert of the French police. I am assigned to the unfortunate death of that man Leleu."

"I see. How did you find me here?"

Inspector Flaubert rubbed a spot on the top of his shiny head. He was not a young man, but his sharp eyes seemed to miss nothing. "I am an old friend of Claque. We sometimes play cards together, and drink a little wine. He told me of your late visit last evening."

"I have an interest in antiques," Rand said.

"So I notice. Have you found what you seek?"

"No."

The detective nodded. "It so often happens. You are from Concealed Communications, I believe?"

"My visit is strictly unofficial. A favor to an old school chum."

"Of course! We all must do favors for friends on occasion."

"What about Leleu's death? What interests you so much?"

Inspector Flaubert shrugged. "Only the man. He was a murderer himself, and he ends up a victim."

"I understood it was self-defense on the woman's part."

"There is no doubt he deserved to die. But I wonder what brought him to that house. He had been a spy once. Perhaps he was one still."

"A spy without a country," Rand reminded the Frenchman. "The Nazi menace has been gone for a long time."

"So it has."

"Is there any possibility someone other than Mrs. Effing shot him?"

Flaubert shook his head. "No, no—only her fingerprints were on the gun. A good clear set. Well, good luck with your quest."

Rand watched the French detective until he disappeared. An odd little man, he thought. And shrewd as they come.

He went back to his searching for another half hour, then gave it up. Satisfied there was nothing to be found, he returned to the hotel where Walter Effing and his wife were staying.

"Where have you been all morning?" Effing demanded. "Did you get the letter?"

Rand took it from his pocket and handed it over. "No trouble. You can forget about Canday."

Effing let out his breath in a long sigh. "Rand, how can I ever thank you?"

"There's no need to. Maybe I'll need a favor from you some day."

Glenda Effing chose that

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moment to enter the room. She glanced from one to the other, and then at the letter on blue paper that her husband still held in his hand. "What is it now?" she asked.

"Glenda—"

"I believe we should have another little talk, Mrs. Effing," Rand interrupted.

She seemed about to refuse, but then, seeing the pleading expression on her husband's face, she turned and stalked to the adjoining room. Rand followed her, closing the connecting door.

"Did Walter pay for that letter?" she asked finally, not looking at him.

"No. I managed to get it from the blackmailer."

"Canday?"

"Yes. You were foolish to send him to Leleu with the message."

"I didn't know then that it would end as it did."

Rand sat down opposite her. "Tell me about Leleu. Where did you meet him? You at least owe me that much for my trouble."

She closed her eyes. "How much do you know? How much does Walter know?"

"I imagine he's guessed a lot. As for me, I only know that you and Leleu were probably having an affair."

The eyes came open. "Is that so strange? Do you think at thirty-seven I'm too old for one?"

"No. Only you should have been more careful in choosing a lover. Georges Leleu was a German spy and a murderer, as you know. I think he sought you out only because he thought your job with the gallery would help him find the house he was looking for."

"And what house would that be?"

"The house where he was brought for interrogation after his capture in 1944. I imagine he was brought there blindfolded. It was a fairly common practice with prisoners, and it would explain why he never knew the exact location of the house. He knew only that it was a large place near an airfield. A blindfold would not have prevented his hearing the planes take off and land."

"You're doing a great deal of guessing, Mr. Rand."

"I don't think so. He was staying at a hotel in Orly, where the main Paris airport is located. I suppose he figured the house he sought was in that area, but of course there are a half dozen smaller airports around Paris. He must have described the house to you, though—its insides, at least—because you were able to find it and send him that letter."

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"You're right," Glenda Effing said. Her last resistance was worn down, and she seemed willing now to talk about it. "I met him in Turin about six months ago. I suppose he did seek me out, but I didn't realize it at the time. I was down there on a buying trip for the gallery, and he must have heard about me. We became friends and finally he told me about the house he was searching for. He'd never seen it from the outside, he said, but it was very large, near Paris, and near an airport."

"Did he say why he needed to find it?"

"No. But he described some of the furniture in great detail. He wanted me to search through the old country homes around the city until I found this one, and then notify him. At first I merely laughed, but after a time I saw that he was deadly serious."

Rand nodded. "I imagine he spent the last quarter of a century thinking about that house, and how some day he'd find it. You see, Leleu was arrested as a German spy in 1944, but he was never tried on that charge. He was never tried for treason, either, though he was a French citizen. He was convicted only of killing a guard during an attempt to escape. The reason, I think, was that they found no evidence on him after his arrest. They took him, blindfolded, to that house—an intelligence command post for Allied forces—but somehow before they could conduct a thorough search of him he'd managed to hide the incriminating evidence. He hid it in that house, probably in a piece of furniture, and now all these years later he was looking for it."

"But why? That's what I asked him last week at the house. Why?"

"He was a spy grown old in prison," Rand said. "He had nothing else but that treasure he'd hidden in his youth. I suppose it was something he thought he could sell—not to the Nazi government, of course, but to someone else. Even now it must have some value." He paused and looked at her. "I've been all over that furniture at the warehouse, Mrs. Effing. I found nothing. Did he find it?"

She shook her head. "Whatever it was he didn't find it. I remember he was so pleased to see the house. He recalled the rooms on the ground floor, showed me where the command room and the interrogation room had been. He pointed out an ornate table that had functioned as a stand for a short-wave radio, and a desk at which some officer had sat. But

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then, when he couldn't find what he sought, he flew into a rage. I realized in that moment what a fool I'd been. He didn't love me, and never had. He'd only used me to find this house. But he'd brought a gun along, in case the caretaker interfered. It was on his coat which was flung over a chair. When he started screaming at me, telling me it had all been for nothing, I grabbed the gun and shot him."

"Just like that."

She nodded. "Just like that. I thought the attempted assault made a much simpler story."

Rand sighed and got to his feet. "All right. I'll leave you to work it out with Walter."

Effing was waiting in the next room. "Is it over?" he asked. "Is she safe?"

"She's safe," Rand said.

"Are you going back to England now?"

"After a bit."

Rand drove out to the house on the Melun road for the last time. It was late afternoon when he arrived, and the shadows were already lengthening across the formal gardens where Guy Canday was clipping a hedge.

"You back again?" he asked as Rand approached. "Didn't you do enough last night?"

"I have one more question to ask you."

"Oh?"

"Which side did you sell it to?"

"What? What in hell you talking about?"

"Leleu searched for this house because he'd hidden something here a long time ago. He didn't find it. Someone else might have, during the years, but I don't think so. Whatever Leleu hid, he obviously thought it was in a safe place or he wouldn't have come looking for it a quarter of a century later."

"You think I found it?"

Rand nodded. "I'm sure you did. You found it when you supervised the cleaning and restoring of the furnishings."

"And I sold it?"

"You were in the war. You would know its value, just as you knew the value of Glenda Effing's letter. Which side did you sell it to?"

Guy Canday smiled. "You can't touch me."

"I know that. Which side?"

Canday sighed. "The Americans. They always offer the most money."

"What was it?"

"A strip of microfilm, hidden behind a drawer in one of the old desks. I wouldn't have found it except that I took all the drawers out to have the desk restored."

"How'd you know what it was?"

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"I enlarged it and translated the German—enough to see that it was a detailed plan for using V-2 rockets to cause a conflict in the Middle East between the United States and Russia. Even back in 1944 the Germans were planning ahead. Funny thing, it's possibly more valuable today than it was in '44."

"Possibly," Rand said. He glanced down at the hedge clippers. "Why are you working out here, when the place is going to be torn down?"

Guy Canday shrugged. "A man has to keep busy, doesn't he?"

"Yes," Rand agreed, looking up at the sun. "I suppose so."

In the morning, at Orly Airport, Rand saw the familiar bald head of Inspector Flaubert moving toward him through the crowd. "You are returning to London, Mr. Rand?" the Frenchman asked.

"Yes. My work here is finished."

"Work? But surely there was nothing for Concealed Communications in this matter."

"No," Rand agreed. Nothing but a communication which had been concealed for a quarter of a century and then found again. Nothing but a spy without a country who had tried to live again and had ended up dead.

"I trust you will visit us again," Inspector Flaubert said, extending his hand. "It is always a pleasure to have a British spy among us."

"I'm hardly a spy," Rand corrected, but the man took no notice. "As I said, I was only helping an old friend."

"Ah, yes. Mr. and Mrs. Effing."

"They'll be following me to London as soon as your hearing is over."

The Frenchman frowned. "Perhaps Mrs. Effing might be delayed for a time."

"Oh?"

"There is the matter of this shooting, you know. She said that *Leleu had the gun* and they struggled and it went off. Yet a perfect set of *her* fingerprints appears on the weapon and *nothing* of his. That is hardly consistent with her story."

"I hadn't thought of that," Rand admitted.

The Frenchman smiled. "That is why I am a detective and you are a spy."

"I'm not really a—"

"They are boarding your plane, Mr. Rand. I hope you have a good flight."

They shook hands once more and Rand went to the plane. When he landed in London it was raining, but the wetness on his face felt good. He was glad to be home.

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a NEW crime-detective story by

ANTHONY GILBERT

Two women, complete strangers to each other, meet in the waiting room of St. Barnabas' Eye Clinic—and thereby hangs a tale. And is there anyone in the mystery field who can write more convincingly about certain types of women than Anthony Gilbert? Always there's that special touch . . .

A DAY OF ENCOUNTERS

by ANTHONY GILBERT

I noticed the woman the minute she came into the clinic—St. Barnabas' Eye Clinic where I go every six weeks about a little trouble I have. I'm Martita Browne and you've probably seen my books all over the place. Eggheads despise them, but I consider myself a benefactress. Even in the Affluent Society lots of women lead pretty dreary lives. So my books are like a magic mirror that reflects them as they see themselves, not as they appear to husbands or families—beautiful, loyal, courageous, even though they may scream at the sight of a mouse, and above all irresistible to men; and, naturally, only to be had at the cost of a wedding ring. Services like that are worth paying for, and, to do my readers justice, they pay at the rate of substantial royalties to me every year.

This newcomer—I realized at once I'd never seen her before, you get to know the regulars—didn't resemble my heroines in any way. For one thing, she was past 40, not good-looking, though she had a lively face that was somehow demure, too, which wasn't without attraction. But though her clothes were good—her crocodile bag alone had set someone back about £60, her scarf was pure heavy silk, and her shoes hand-made—she lacked something, a kind of vitality perhaps. There was a man with her, presumably her husband, a fair, quiet sort of fellow, but not living on the breadline—far from

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it. An expensive house in the suburbs, I thought, with central heating, a double garage, storm windows, at least one trip abroad every year, and not a package tour at that.

I usually sit in a sort of alcove that holds only three or four chairs, and hardly anyone else ever chooses them. The patients have an idea that if they sit in the middle of the room they'll be seen sooner; but, of course, it doesn't help; it's all poppycock—you're seen when the doctor's ready for you and not before. I'd brought the proofs of my new book with me—*Not Wooed But Won*—and I thought I might get quite a lot of work done while I waited. I could see it was going to be a busy clinic this afternoon.

I was a bit surprised when the newcomer came to sit beside me. "Is it always as crowded as this?" she asked. "Willy said he'd be back in an hour and he does hate waiting." Then before I could reply she saw the proofs on my lap—I hadn't begun, so the title page was on top. "Are you Martita Browne?" she asked. "Did you write that?"

I knew what was coming, of course. She'd always longed to write, but there'd never been time; her life story would make a wonderful plot, and since she'd never use it—and of course I'd disguise the names. If I've heard that once, I've heard it a hundred times. I was wondering how I could suggest that none of my readers would be interested in a woman in her forties when she gushed on, "People say that sometimes your heroes are too good to be true, but of course that's nonsense. I know because—well, you might say I married one of them. You might have taken Victor for your model."

"I thought you said his name was Willy," I murmured.

"Victor was my first husband. Willy's as different as chalk from cheese. Victor had everything—good looks, a marvelous figure, tall, dark, alluring—it wasn't surprising all the women were after him. I'm sure they must all have gasped when they heard it was me he was going to marry. I wasn't even young—twenty-eight—you'd never have a heroine of twenty-eight, would you, Miss Browne?"

Well, she knew I wouldn't. My readers never see themselves as more than 25 at the very most.

"I wasn't in the least like one of your heroines," the voice babbled on. "My father—he was a minister with a great sense of fun—everyone said so—used to call me Miss

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Brains-Before-Beauty. Count your blessings, he'd say. Brains are often a better investment. And I put mine out to usury like that man in the Bible, whose ten talents turned into twenty talents. I never really thought I'd get married."

"But there was Victor?" I remarked.

"Yes. He came into this office where I was working—actually, it was my own business—and it was like the sun coming in. He was a bit younger than me, but he said he preferred mature women. Girls never had any conversation except hairdos and what he called 'parish pump' subjects."

"What was his job?" I asked. It was quite automatic. I couldn't have even a minor character in a story without knowing his background, and obviously Victor wasn't going to be minor.

"Oh!" For the first time she sounded evasive. "He was a sales representative—went round to the big industrial houses."

"A success?" I bored on. You might say it was none of my business, but the woman had thrust herself on me and I had a right to some return. Anyway, you can never be sure where you'll find plot and character ideas.

"You'd have thought with those looks and that charm he couldn't fail, though he always warned me it was cutthroat competition, and I suppose he wasn't ruthless enough. Still, at first everything went all right, and then he started going 'on the road.' You know what that means? The firms—and they weren't always the same firms—sent him to the outlying districts. He made a joke of it. Someone's got to carry news to the heathen, he'd say, but—oh, Miss Browne, it was like playing Shaftesbury Avenue and then finding yourself sent out with a second-class repertory company. Luckily I wasn't called Miss Brains-Before-Beauty for nothing. I'd sold my business when I got married, so I had a nice little nest egg put by, and believe me, it came in very useful."

Candidly, I didn't think this was getting me anywhere. A plain woman had been married for her money—that's what it amounted to. But of course there had to be a third party, otherwise there was no story at all. And even I couldn't believe *she* would turn up with a lover.

"So what happened?" I encouraged.

Her reply startled me. "Oh, he died."

"Victor died?"

"Yes. It was a bit sudden."

I had a fresh idea. "Sudden

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enough to attract the attention of the police?"

She took off her handsome gloves and folded them carefully on her knee. Her rings would have paid my rent for a year.

"Anyone could tell you *are* a writer. You know all the answers."

But did I? There'd been an odd note in her voice when she said, "Oh, he died." Not grief, not relief either, but a sort of lack of confidence, as if she couldn't be certain. But that was nonsense. You either know your husband's dead or you don't. Or perhaps she knew he wasn't, and he was blackmailing her. It seemed pretty obvious she'd struck it rich in her second marriage. I was so deep in calculations that I missed the next few sentences, but what I did hear nearly blew me out of my chair.

"You couldn't call it murder, could you?" the voice pleaded. "I've waited eight years to hear someone say that, only there was never anyone to tell. I don't even have a sister."

And wouldn't tell her if you had, I thought grimly. Not if you've got the sense you were born with.

I realized now, of course, that she had no doubts about dear Victor's death—a posh funeral and wreaths three foot deep, most likely. No, it was the way of it that worried her. But—murder? I hadn't time to think straight.

"What did the police make of it?" I asked. "I mean, who mentioned murder?"

"There were only three alternatives—accident, suicide, or murder—and no one could believe it was an accident."

"Why should it be a suicide?"

"Well, there was this girl—Elizabeth Sinclair."

Inwardly I heaved a sigh of relief. So we'd got to the heart of the story at last—the third side of the triangle, without which there's no story at all.

"People used to ask me sometimes—aren't you afraid of someone trying to steal your handsome husband now that he's away from home so much? But I wasn't. Oh, there might be incidents, but a sensible wife shuts her eyes to them. He was away three or four days on end sometimes. Frankly, I didn't see how he could afford to leave me. It's a cruel thing to say about a dead man, Miss Browne, but—well, charm's like anything else: it gets tarnished, and thirty-six is different from twenty-four, which was his age when we married. It appeared he'd met this girl—she was barely twenty-one—and it had been love at first sight for both of them."

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"I thought you said he couldn't afford to keep a wife. Or did Elizabeth have money?"

"She was the only daughter of a very rich man—the only child—and she'd get everything."

"Unless Daddy married again." I took for granted he was a widower.

Her mouth hardened. "You didn't know Victor. He'd have insisted on a prenuptial settlement—and he'd have got it. I don't say Daddy would have approved, but Elizabeth was the kind no man can resist. Now, *there* was a heroine for you, Miss Browne. Dark and slender and—glowing. You remember Shelley's moon-maiden, with white fire laden? She made me think of that. I only saw her the once, you know."

"You mean he brought her?" Victor was proving himself less and less like one of my heroes.

"She brought herself. 'I thought if I came in person, perhaps you'd understand,' she said. 'Oh, how can you want to hold onto him when you know it's me he loves? Why won't you divorce him, Mrs. Hughes? You've had twelve years—'

"And, of course, Victor could live another thirty. But not with this girl, I decided. If I'd been tempted to yield before, I was iron-hard now.

" 'Surely she made yo see—' That was Victor talkin when he came home.

" 'So it was your idea?' said. 'I might have guessed i You must be mad if you thin I'd make it possible for you t ruin that girl's life,' I sai warmly. 'She's made for bett than second-hand goods.'

" 'I won't give her up Victor said.

" 'There's no law to sto your setting up house,' I agree 'But would Daddy like that He raged, but he didn't mo me. 'You'll only marry her ov my dead body,' I said. Ha you ever noticed, Miss Brown how often clichés come hom to roost?"

"But it was Victor's dea body," I pointed out.

"Yes."

"And there was talk murder."

"It's what the police woul have liked to believe," she sai bitterly. "I suppose you ca hardly blame them. You don get promotion by arrestin motorists for illegal parking.

"You want to be careful," advised her sharply. "You neve know who may be sitting nex to you in a place like thi There's an ex-Superintender Humbolt who comes he sometimes." He was one of th few useful contacts I'd made a the clinic; he'd helped me ou

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of knotty problems once or twice when my heroines had been more feather-brained than usual. I knew what he'd say about Victor. Never trust charm, it's the most powerful weapon in the devil's armory. I've heard him say that more than once. "But why should anyone think it was murder?"

She went off at a bit of a tangent. "If you saw someone who'd cheated you sitting on a balcony, say, and a chimney pot started to topple, and you knew it would hit him and you didn't yell out, would that make you a murderer?"

It wasn't the sort of problem I've ever been called on to solve. Murder's taboo in my kind of tale. "Accessory before the fact?" I hazarded.

"Ah, but whose accessory? You can't be accessory to a force of nature—but what else caused the chimney pot to fall?"

"A good question," I agreed. I wondered what the pious would say. An Act of God? Not very complimentary to God, of course. Not that I supposed a chimney pot had actually played any part in this story. And of course it turned out to be just an analogy.

But talk about clichés! The truth was almost as incredible—the truth as she told it, that is.

It seems that it was Victor's custom to make their after-dinner coffee.

"And you let him do it, even after you'd refused him a divorce?" My most addle-pated heroine would have had more sense than that.

"If he'd meant to—to do away with me—he'd never have chosen anything so obvious."

"Sometimes the most obvious thing is also the most subtle."

"Anyway, that night—it was a few days after our conversation about Elizabeth and I thought he was accepting the situation—he'd just brought in the coffeepot and tray when the phone rang. I went to answer it, expecting it to be for me. But it was for Victor. When I came in he'd just poured out the coffee. 'Well, that was quick,' he said. 'Or was it a wrong number?' 'It's for you,' I told him.

" 'Chaps do choose the most inconvenient times,' he grumbled, looking at his coffee. 'He might have waited another five minutes.',

" 'It'll take five minutes to cool—or are you afraid I might lace it with arsenic while you're out of the room?' I said.

"He stared. 'That's a nice thing for a wife to say to her husband.' He jammed the cup down. 'Don't let yours grow

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cold. I poured it out'—and he went off, shutting the door behind him. It's funny, Miss Browne, how trifles can hold your attention. I hadn't thought anything about his pouring out both cups till he called my attention to it, and it made me wonder. You see, he knows—knew—I love everything piping hot, and if it had been Leila Hope on the phone—the call I'd expected—well, it's always ten minutes before she hangs up.

"I'd picked up my cup, but now I put it down and crept over and opened the door. The telephone was in an alcove in the hall, so that I could hear without being seen. Victor was laughing and joking, then suddenly his voice changed. 'I'm very anxious about her,' he said. 'She gets these moods, you can't reason with her, and she's inclined to be morbid. I can neither laugh nor argue her out of it.'

"I shut the door and came back to my chair. So that was his game, I thought. I was to be represented as being eccentric, so that anything might be expected of me. Automatically I picked up the coffee, and then the notion came to me. I'm not a writer, Miss Browne, though I'm quite a reader. And being alone so much I'd had time to think. And I wondered why he'd been so anxious that I drink my coffee hot. It wasn't like him to worry about things like that. And then his saying I was morbid."

I interrupted rather brutally. "So you decided he'd poisoned the coffee and then gone off to telephone. But how did he know it was going to ring then?"

"He could have arranged it, knowing I'd probably answer. Oh, I didn't think he intended murder. He knew the surviving partner would be the first suspect, and there was no one but ourselves in the house. But don't you see, that meant he could tell any story he liked! I thought he'd put in enough of whatever it was to make it necessary to call a doctor, who'd say it was attempted suicide, and then later, if, for instance, I fell under a subway train or something—I don't drive a car—everyone would remember the first time."

"Why didn't you pour the coffee out of the window?" I suggested sensibly.

"I didn't think of that, only of upsetting the table, and that would have meant breaking the cups; but then I'm not clumsy, so I'd have aroused his suspicions at once. Besides, I didn't see why he shouldn't be—what's the phrase?"

"Hoist on his own petard?"

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"That's it. Biter bit. So—oh, Miss Browne, I switched the cups. I thought it would serve a dual purpose—make him uncomfortable and let him see I knew what he was up to. I thought of it as a self-protective measure."

"And when he came back?"

"I'd finished my cup, and he drank his—well, mine really. Then we each had a refill, and soon after he said he was tired and how about bed? Happy dreams, he said. Those were the last words I ever heard from him. When I went in next morning with a cup of tea—we had separate rooms by then, since I'd found out about Elizabeth—oh, it was clear he wasn't going to be interested in tea any longer.

"The doctor said he must have been dead for quite some time; and he couldn't give a death certificate, he'd have to inform the coroner. That's when the horror suddenly became real. You're very clever, Miss Browne, not to have crimes in your books. People who like violence can get it in the newspapers. The police were in and out of that house like—like mites in a cheese."

"What was it he'd taken?"

"One of the barbiturates. I don't understand about medicine—I'm never ill, neither of us ever was. I hardly take an aspirin six times a year. Of course, they searched everything, almost took the paper off the walls, but they couldn't find even an empty vial. And seeing that I practically never went to a doctor they couldn't have traced the stuff to me, however much they'd wanted to."

"Where did they think he got it from?"

"No one knows, but he did travel for a firm of pharmaceutical chemists at one time. He could easily have got it that way, though I've heard you *can* get hold of drugs even without a doctor's prescription. But that was only the beginning. Accident was ruled out—which left suicide or murder. Everyone said he wouldn't have committed suicide, and I didn't think he would myself."

She paused, but I wasn't letting her stop there. It's not often an hour-and-a-half wait in a clinic can bring you a plum like this. "So it *had* to be murder?"

"Only it couldn't be. What advantage did I gain from his death, I asked them? I didn't inherit a penny—in fact, after the funeral I had to pay a large tailor's bill—he was very dandified about his clothes. If I'd wanted to be rid of him I had only to walk out. I had my own means, you know."

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"You didn't think of telling them the simple truth?"

Her eyes stared at me, as round as pennies. "Well, naturally I thought of it; and naturally I held my tongue. There was no proof and if I let them know I had a suspicion—well, there was only my word for it that *I* hadn't doped the coffee. They wouldn't have got a conviction, I know that, but the mud would have stuck to me for life. Anyway, the verdict was death from barbiturate poisoning, with insufficient evidence to show how it had been administered.

"But that was bad enough. I was conscious of very odd looks wherever I went, and people in shops suddenly and mysteriously didn't have the things I wanted. A little later I changed back from Ruth Hughes to Ruth White—they're neither of them conspicuous names, are they?—and I came south. In London they might never have heard of Victor Hughes and quite likely they hadn't. Anyway, it's like that hymn you learn at school. 'They fly forgotten as a dream—' "

"And in London you met Willy?"

"Well, that was three years ago. I still had my capital and I went into partnership with a woman who ran an agency. I supplied the competence and she supplied the charm, which seemed to me quite a fair division of labor. When I met Willy—he was so different from Victor they might hardly have belonged to the same species."

"And yet they say that when people marry again, they always choose the same type," I reminded her.

"I suppose there has to be an exception to every rule. Victor had been so popular, but Willy seemed so—so neglected. He'd been a widower for years, had a bookshop, and was the studious type. The shop had great potentialities, but, oh, Miss Browne, the confusion in it, everything so hugger-mugger it would take a week to find anything a customer wanted. Willy lived—very uncomfortably—in two rooms above the shop. The first time I invited him back to my apartment for a meal he said, 'This is what I call a home. I've seen nothing like it since Edna died fifteen years ago.'

"He was so vague—if he'd been in Victor's shoes the police wouldn't have found any trouble at all in believing he'd taken the stuff himself thinking it was saccharine. I had a sense of responsibility towards him. That was the start. Of course, it was never like Victor, but I was forty-five by then, an age when your ardor has cooled off. And

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then, when once you've been married—even if it hadn't worked out too well—well, it seems unnatural to be living alone.

"Anyway, we got married. I kept up my interest in the business—Willy had the shop, you see, and it wasn't as though we were likely to have a family—and week-ends we worked among the books. I tell you, Miss Browne, you wouldn't recognize the place now. It's got quite a reputation. We can tell customers right away if we've got what they want in stock, and, if not, where we can get it and how long they must wait. A few months ago we put in a manager, a very capable fellow of about forty-five—sometimes, I say to Willy, I don't know how we'd get on without Mr. Brett. It means Willy isn't tied down so much, he can go to book sales, have a bit of private life. Mr. Brett's a bachelor—it doesn't seem to matter to him how long hours he works."

I only had time for one more question before her name was called. "Did you tell Willy about Victor?"

She looked astounded, as though her eyes would drop out of her head.

"Of course not! All that happened to Mrs. Victor Hughes, and to me at least she's as dead as her husband. Nothing whatever to do with Willy."

Then her name was called and she jumped up with the eagerness of all new patients. I saw that she'd left her umbrella leaning against the chair, but I supposed she'd come back for it. I got down to my proofs at last; a while later I heard a creak as some heavy body descended alongside mine.

A voice said, "Well, Miss Browne, still at it, I see?"

I looked up and there was my old friend, ex-Superintendent Humbolt, though he doesn't insist on his former title any more. Pulling rank, he calls it.

"This is a day of encounters," I said. "I haven't seen you for a long time."

"Come for my semiannual checkup," he told me. "Fact is, my sight's not what it used to be. There's one disease none of the doctors can cure, and that's *Anno Domini*. And a good thing for the race it can't. We'd all be living in trees like chimps—there wouldn't be anywhere else to live."

"Oh, come on," I jollied him. "You're not that old. I was wondering if you could give me some advice."

"I knew it," he said mournfully. "All you ever want of me is a chance to pick my brains."

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"It's a point arising from a story," I explained, carefully not saying it was one of mine. "If you'd been married to a man who tried to murder you, and later on you decided to marry again, would you tell Husband Number Two about Number One?"

"I'd never put the notion of murder in any husband's mind," he replied promptly.

"That solves my problem," I told him, and then he shook out his newspaper and I got to work.

A bit later a rather diffident voice said, "I was looking for my wife, and I believe this is her umbrella." And I looked up to see the rather vague-looking man who'd come with the "late" Mrs. Victor Hughes.

"It's quite a relief," he told me. "I thought I'd lost her."

An odd sound, like a bear chuckling to itself in a sardonic sort of way, came from behind the open newspaper.

"You want to be careful you don't make a habit of it, Willy." The newspaper was lowered. Ex-Superintendent Humbolt might appear to be grinning but his voice was the voice of Jehovah. "This 'ud be the third, wouldn't it? It never pays to overdo things. People get such strange ideas. Funny, you know."

"I don't call that very funny," said Willy. "I'm surprised at you, Mr. Humbolt."

"Your wife's seeing one of the doctors," I intervened quickly. "I don't suppose she'll be long."

"Don't want to get caught up in the rush hour on the underground," Humbolt went on, and Willy said, "I've got the car. We live out at Sheepshot now, and Ruth doesn't drive. Still, it's a nice house and a big garden. My wife enjoys gardening."

"Nothing wrong with gardening so long as you don't dig too deep." I had never thought that Humbolt could be so malicious. And then *she* came hurrying back, saying, "Oh, Willy, did I keep you long? I had to wait, and the doctor thinks I should come again in six weeks."

"It'll be Harley Street for you next time, my dear," said Willy.

"You must meet Miss Browne, Martita Browne, the famous writer. You know." She didn't pay any attention to Humbolt. After all, she'd never set eyes on him before.

"Why did you say that, about losing wives?" I demanded, as soon as the couple was out of earshot. I simply had to know. If an angel had summoned me with a trumpet at

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that moment, I wouldn't have heard.

"The object of the police is to try and prevent crime," Humbolt said in his deceptively quiet way. "Poor Willy! He's lost a couple of wives already. Such a careless fellow—or could I be wrong? I mean, no doctors, no deathbeds. Number One was drowned in the South of France. They'd only been married two years. Something went wrong, the boat overturned, he kept swimming round and diving for her; they saw him from the shore, but he couldn't find her. She was under the boat, and they said she must have hit her head on something that knocked her out.

"Then about three years later he married again. It was the Costa Brava this time, and he was miles away, sunbathing. She'd taken the car—she brought that and some other very nice bits of goods you'd not turn your nose up at, Miss Browne, to the marriage—and had gone to visit friends. When she didn't come back he got anxious, phoned the friends' house, but she'd never arrived. Then he called the authorities, but you know how it is in Spain. *Manana!*" He looked at me questioningly.

"I understand," I assured him. "Never do today what you can put off till tomorrow."

"She'd been dead for hours when they found her, under the wreck of the car. One of the Spanish police said, 'What a waste! Such a beautiful motor!' Nothing about the lady, but I daresay when they found her she wasn't so beautiful."

"What did they think had happened?"

"No one could tell for sure, the car being in the state it was—something gone wrong with the steering, perhaps. Only—she had been proud of that car, had had it completely overhauled only the week before, when they'd left England. Still, there were no witnesses and a car can't talk. The advantage of coming to a sticky end in a warm foreign climate is you can't hang about waiting for relatives—"

"You mean, she was buried in Spain?"

"Both wives were buried abroad. Good sense really. The authorities make a lot of hoo-ha about shipping a corpse home—much less trouble and, of course, much more economical to have it buried on the spot. Wonder if the new Mrs. Willy likes to travel."

"I don't think she said. Just that she'd met him by way of business. Gone to his shop to buy a book, I suppose." That surprised me. She looked the

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sort who would expect to get her reading from the Public Library.

Humbolt shook his head. "They met at her place of business, not his."

"She said she ran some sort of agency with another woman."

"That's right. Marriage bureau. Fact, Miss Browne. They'll tell you there's one born every minute, and you don't have to be a policeman to know it's true. Convenient for chaps like Willy: you get all the statistics about the lady, age, looks—they have to supply a photograph and not one taken twenty years ago at that—financial position—the agency does all your homework for you. It's my belief if a chimp walked into one of those places they'd match him up with a woman chimp."

He thought a moment, then went on, "I suppose it occurred to Willy he could hardly do better than to marry the boss. To my way of thinking he's no matinee idol, but somehow he gets the women. That quality called charm, I suppose. She kept on with her interest in the agency, and he had the shop—got a very good name now, I understand, quite a little gold mine."

"I thought you were retired," I remarked maliciously.

"Once a copper always a copper. I'll retire when they start ringing the church bell for me. Still, as you say, no skin off my nose."

"It proves one thing," I said. "Women do always go for the same type. Willy may not look remotely like Victor, but they're chips from the same block."

I saw I'd really got his attention now. "Who's Victor?"

"Victor Hughes—her first husband."

"First time I heard she had one before she married Willy. Sure she's not pulling your leg?"

"After he died—"

"How was that?"

"You could call it a sort of accident."

"With or without wifely assistance?" The Day of Judgment will hold no shocks for that man.

"Let's say that she took a chance and it came off." I told him in detail about her switching the cups. "And if you don't believe me," I said, "there's bound to be a record. I'm not sure where it happened, but somewhere up north."

He shook his head. "Not me, Miss Browne. You've just reminded me, I'm retired and if there wasn't a trial—or was there?"

"There wasn't enough evi-

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dence to charge her. They never seemed to think of the fourth alternative—that he might have been the one with the murderous impulse."

"You bet they thought of it, but the police can't go on feminine intuition, not the way ladies do. No witnesses, no proof she'd ever handled a barbiturate in her life, and, like she said, no motive. Anyway, it wasn't my manor and the Chief Constable wouldn't thank me for raking up an old case. I've no fresh evidence. You might say it's a good thing she knows how to take care of herself, seeing who she's married to now."

"But you can't leave it at that," I exclaimed. "She could be in danger this very minute."

Humbolt has one of those India-rubber faces that can change under your eyes. Now he looked like a bloodhound—sad, a bit bloodshot, long drooping jowls. "You don't have to worry about her, Miss Browne, now that Willy knows we've met her. Even he 'ud be hard put to it to explain a third tragedy. Of course, if I was to drop dead, or you—but you take it from me, there'll be no need to search the newspapers for her name this side of Christmas."

Only the ex-Superintendent was wrong. About four months later I picked up my *Morning Argus*—the posh papers are no good to writers like me—and there he was on the front page: *Well-Known Bookseller Falls to His Death.* It was in France—that was true to type, I thought—they'd been staying in one of these big old-fashioned hotels with a balcony and steps leading to a courtyard, a fountain, flowers, that sort of thing.

There was a gate in the trellis you could unbolt if you wanted to go down. The widow said they'd been talking and she went back into the bedroom for a cigarette, and the next minute she heard a scream and a sort of muffled crash and the trellis gate was swinging. It was two stories to the courtyard and Willy never recovered consciousness.

Everyone in the hotel was shocked—such an affectionate couple! Only they changed their tune when some busybody dug up the story of his previous wives. Then they started to talk about the mills of God grinding slowly, Providence seeing to it that he'd fallen into the pit he'd dug—meaning he'd opened the gate intending to give her a fatal shove, and then forgotten he'd opened it.

Her story was they'd been in the courtyard earlier, looking at

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the fish in the fountain, and he must have forgotten to bolt the gate after them. No, there was no family tomb, and burial on the spot, she was sure, was what he'd have preferred.

A few weeks ago I happened to be passing the bookshop. It was just about closing time, and Ruth came out with a tall dressy sort of fellow—45 or 46, I'd say.

When she saw me Ruth said, "Fancy meeting you again! Do you still go to that eye clinic? Do you remember me telling you about Mr. Brett? You did read about Willy, I expect? Wasn't it terrible? But he was always so absent-minded. I don't know what I'd have done without Malcolm."

It was easy to see who Malcolm was—easy, too, to realize she probably wasn't going to have to do without him.

I haven't seen Mr. Humbolt since—perhaps he doesn't come to the clinic any more. Of course, I'm only a writer of romantic tales, not works of logic or mystical speculation; but I do sometimes wonder, if there really is a Hereafter, what Victor and Willy are thinking now.

"O"

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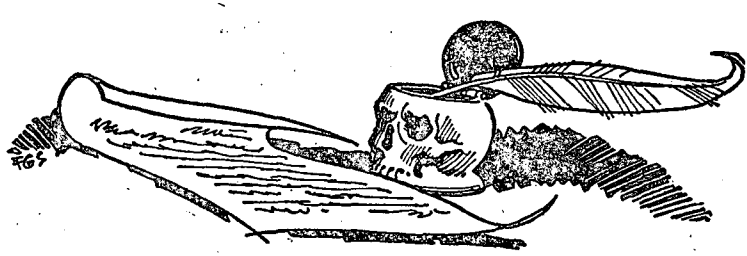

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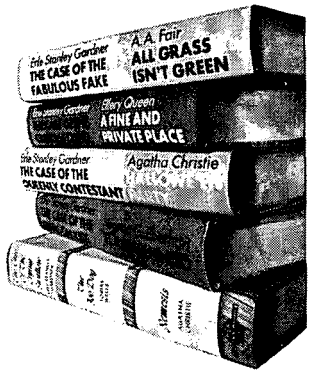

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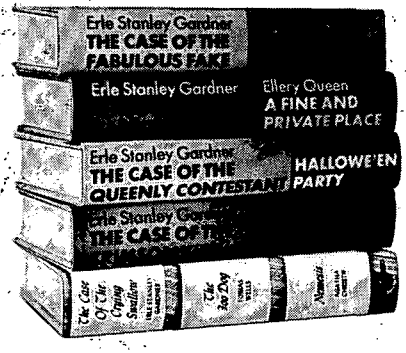

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